

Joseph Goering

*The
Virgin
and
the
Grail*

Origins of a Legend

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Joseph Goering

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For Seth and Johanna, who made me do it,
and for Paula, who made them

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Preface

A few years ago I asked a class of undergraduates to read Chrétien de Troyes' story of Perceval and the Holy Grail. I expected to talk with them about how the young Perceval learned, through painful experience, to be a good knight and a true lover. The students, however, were not to be led down that road. They wanted to know about the Holy Grail, and they refused to be put off.

When pressed, I told them that Chrétien's *Perceval* or the *Story of the Grail* (ca. 1180–1190) was apparently the first story ever written about the Grail. Eventually I might have been able to trace for them, as I do in this book, the rapid steps by which Chrétien's simple “graal” became associated by later poets with a magical stone, with the chalice of the Last Supper, and with the vessel used by Joseph of Arimathea to capture Christ's blood after the crucifixion. If they had asked about the origins and the meaning of the Grail, whether in Celtic myth, in Indo-European fertility cults, in Christian, Jewish, or Cathar rituals, or in the secret wisdom of the ancients, I would have had to reply that none of these theories, as interesting as they may be, has found much support in the historical record.

Instead, I asked them what the Holy Grail looks like. The answer seemed obvious to many—“a chalice” was the most popular reply—

but upon reflection they all agreed that it was very difficult to tell from Chrétien's bare story what sort of thing a Grail was or how one should imagine it. We concluded, perhaps surprisingly, that Chrétien had no clear idea of just what a Grail was, where it came from, or what it represented, although he was sure that it was important. My question about the Grail hearkened back, I am sure, to a pair of half-remembered pictures that I had chanced upon as a graduate student some twenty-five years earlier. I had been browsing through Otto Demus and Max Hirmer's magnificent book of Romanesque wall paintings, and in the chapter labeled "Spain" I had found two pictures, one described as "the Virgin holding a fiery Grail (early twelfth century)" and the other simply as "Virgin with the Grail (c. 1123)." These paintings had stayed in my mind over the years, I think, largely because of their strange beauty. But I had also been intrigued that the Holy Grail should be depicted so early—more than fifty years before Chrétien's tale—and in Spain rather than in France or Britain. Most surprising of all, of course, was that the Holy Grail should be found in the hands of the Virgin Mary. I put all of this before the students to see what they might make of it. They asked all the right questions: Is it really the "Grail" that the Virgin is holding? Are the dates of the paintings (early twelfth century) accurate? What are the artistic antecedents and models for such pictures? If these paintings really depict the Holy Grail, how could Chrétien come to know about them?

This book emerged in response to their questions. It is divided into three parts. Part I, "From Romance to History," treats the stories of the Holy Grail as they were invented and developed by the poets of northern France and Germany at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century. Theirs are well-known romances, but in retelling them here I hope to add a little to our understanding of just how the stories originated, and how the Grail grew from an indistinct but holy thing in Chrétien, into a holy and

mystical stone in Wolfram von Eschenbach, and into the cup of the Last Supper preserved by Joseph of Arimathea in the story told by Robert de Boron. Part One concludes with a presentation of the first historian to discuss the Grail—a Cistercian monk of the early thirteenth century who made what seems to be the earliest attempt to study the Grail as something other than an object of romantic fiction.

Part II looks back to a period some fifty years earlier, before the first grail romances had been written. It asks where the idea of a Holy Grail came from in the first place, and what might have inspired the poets and storytellers to invent such a far-fetched and far-reaching tale. Here I propose, as an hypothesis, that the object and the image that would become the Holy Grail in the hands of Chrétien de Troyes and his successors originated in the high Pyrenees, in the late eleventh or early twelfth century, as an otherwise unattested attribute of the Virgin Mary. Chapter 5 introduces the evidence by following in the footsteps of the famous bishop, St. Raymund of Roda, as he traveled, in 1123, to the edge of his diocese to consecrate a church in a tiny mountain village. Chapter 6 examines the magnificent frescoes painted on the walls of that church, and especially the painting of the Virgin, at the head of the college of Apostles, holding a radiant dish or platter—a “gradal” in the local dialect—in her covered hand. Such an image of the Virgin holding a sacred vessel is to be found only here, in these mountain villages, and nowhere else in Christian art before this time. Chapter 7 concludes with a survey of the eight other churches in this region with similar paintings of the Virgin and a sacred vessel or grail, all of them painted or sculpted in the years before Chrétien composed his famous story.

Part III attempts to bridge the gulf between these paintings in the South and the poets in the North. It asks how the northern poets, and Chrétien de Troyes in particular, could have come to know about these unusual images of a holy vessel or grail, and then have transformed this vessel into the Holy Grail of Arthurian legend. The

tentative answer reached in Chapter 8, and the evidence on which it is based, came as a surprise to this writer; it is hoped that it might surprise the reader too.

In writing a book such as this I have necessarily taken a few risks and incurred many debts. The risks are of an academic sort. My own training and my professional experience is as an historian, but the argument of this book has lead me into territory that is usually taught and written about by specialists in university departments of art history and of literature. I run the risk that professionals in these disciplines will take exception to my poaching on their grounds. In response to such an imagined charge, I plead *nolo contendere*.

Many of my debts are related to these risks. I am deeply indebted, first, to my teachers in the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto—and among them especially to the late Leonard E. Boyle—for imagining that one could and should study the Middle Ages as a synthetic whole, and be conversant with all of its many parts. It was the institute's founder, Etienne Gilson, who insisted that one could not adequately explore or understand one aspect of medieval society (its philosophy, for example) without also exploring and understanding its history, theology, law, literature, and art. This book attempts, however inadequately, to pay homage to that ideal.

I will forgo naming a long and necessarily incomplete list of colleagues at the University of Toronto and elsewhere who have helped me in my research. I trust they know already how grateful I am for much that is good and accurate in this book. I am also indebted to another class of readers. This book, although intended to persuade my academic colleagues, was inspired not by them, but by friends and family outside of the academy. I have written it in the hope that they, too, might find it interesting and enjoyable. I am grateful for all of those who generously read and commented on chapters along the way, and especially for their unfailing enthusiasm.

Part I

From Romance to History

The one hope is that the things “which never were on sea or land” will be more weird and marvellous than any you have yet heard of . . . it is no accurate information about historical things that you seek, it is the thrill which mere reality would never satisfy.

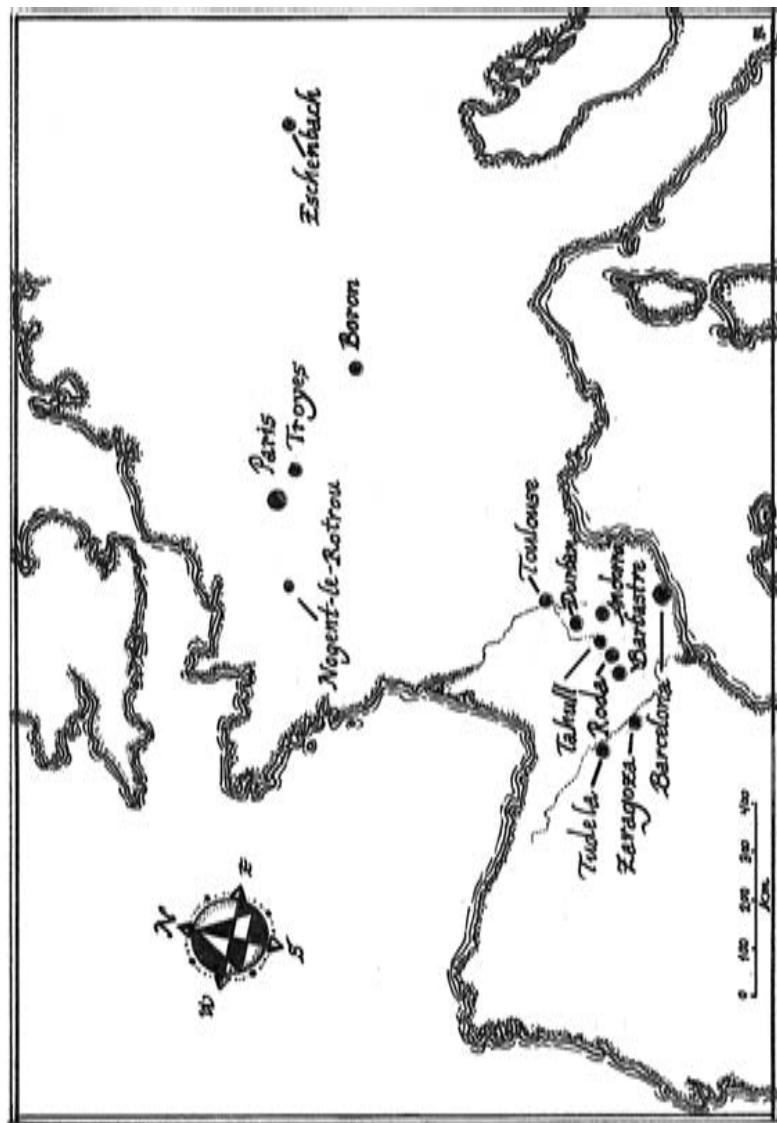
—EZRA POUND, *The Spirit of Romance*

The story is a romance, a fairy-tale for adults.

—J. R. R. TOLKEIN, *Gawain and the Green Knight*

The story of the Holy Grail is not an ancient myth whose roots are lost in the depths of time. The Grail legend was invented by medieval poets and storytellers in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The earliest surviving account of a sacred vessel called a “Grail” is found in a medieval romance entitled *The Story of the Grail (Conte du Graal)* written by Chrétien de Troyes in the north of France at the end of the twelfth century. Chrétien called his long verse-narrative “the finest tale that may be told at royal court,” and contemporaries seem to have agreed. This story of how the young Perceval comes of age, and of his encounter with the mysterious vessel or serving dish that Chrétien calls simply a “graal,” gained immediate renown. Within little more than a decade, in Germany, Wolfram von Eschenbach composed his *Parzival*, an even longer version of the story, in which he embellished and elaborated the story of Parzival (Perceval) and of his adventures, while taking issue

with and “correcting” Chrétien’s depiction of the Grail itself. Wolfram also attempted to provide the Grail with a history in the form of a brief account of how the Grail was brought to earth by angels and preserved in a Grail-castle through many generations. At about the same time as Wolfram was writing his *Parzival*, another poet, Robert de Boron, from the region of Burgundy in east-central France, provided a different account of the origins of the Grail and thus transformed the story in even more radical ways. He set out to invent a cycle of poems that would not only tell the story of Perceval and his quest, but also provide a detailed account of the Grail’s past, from its origins at Christ’s crucifixion (the *Joseph d’Arimathie*), through its entry into the affairs of Britain and the story of King Arthur (the *Merlin*), and then, it seems, to the denouement of the story in the quests for the Grail by Perceval and the Knights of the Round Table, and the death of King Arthur. Robert completed only part of this ambitious project, but his association of the Grail with the biblical figure of Joseph of Arimathea and the events surrounding the crucifixion of Christ would have lasting effects on all subsequent tellings of the story. The threads of these various traditions concerning the Grail and its history were drawn together and elaborated in the so-called Vulgate cycle of Arthurian prose romances, composed probably between 1215 and 1230 by unknown authors, and especially in the first book of that cycle, the *Estoire del Saint Graal*, written around 1225. Shortly after the appearance of this work, the former troubadour and Cistercian abbot, Hélinand of Froidmont (d. 1229), wrote the first historical description of the Grail. His brief discussion, included in his “Chronicle of the World,” is the first sign that the enigmatic and elusive *graal*, introduced into the world of romantic fiction by Chrétien de Troyes, was on the verge of becoming an object of historical, and not just poetic, investigation.



Map 1. Europe (showing places mentioned in text) (Randall Rosenfeld).

CHAPTER 1

Chrétien de Troyes

Perceval or the Conte du Graal

For all practical purposes Chrétien de Troyes must be considered the originator of the Grail legend as we know it today.¹ His *Conte du Graal* (Story of the Grail) was widely popular, and it inspired a host of imitators and competitors immediately after its publication. But it was Chrétien, himself, who seems first to have imagined that a common piece of tableware (for that is the original meaning of the word *graal*) could serve as the centerpiece of a great Romance. If we wish to discover what this Grail is, where it comes from, and why it was thought to be so important, we should begin with Chrétien, and with the few clues that he gives us in his simple and moving story.

Chrétien was probably a native of the city of Troyes, some 140 kilometers east of Paris, in the rich and powerful county of Champagne.² One of the great names in French literature and the foremost poet of twelfth-century France, he chose as his special theme the “Matter of Britain,” that is, the stories of King Arthur and his court. All that we know of Chrétien’s life we learn from his writings. He left three complete romances, *Erec et Enide*, *Cliges*, and *Le Chevalier au Lion* (The Knight with the Lion), and two others he left unfinished, *Le Chevalier de la Charrette* (The Knight of the Cart) and *Le Conte du Graal*. These two unfinished works both contain dedications that allow us to date them at least in a general way. The *Chevalier de la*

Charrette is dedicated to Marie of Champagne (1145–1198), the eldest daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her first husband, King Louis VII of France. Marie married the count of Champagne probably in 1164, so Chrétien’s story must have been written after that date. His *Conte du Graal* is dedicated to Philip of Alsace, Count of Flanders. Since Philip became count of Flanders in 1168, and left on crusade in September 1190, dying overseas in 1191, the *Conte du Graal* must have been written sometime between 1168 and 1191. Most scholars would narrow these dates, and place the composition of the story to the last decade of Chrétien’s known literary activity, between 1180 and 1190.³

The *Conte du Graal* is almost twice as long as Chrétien’s other romances. Yet only about twenty-five lines of this 9,000-line poem mention the Grail. It is no difficult task to set out here the entirety of that material. The first mention of the Grail is in Chrétien’s dedication to Count Philip of Flanders: “Is he [Philip] not worthier than Alexander . . . ? Yes, never doubt this. Therefore [Chrétien’s] labor will not be wasted when, at the count’s command, he endeavors and strives to put into rhyme the finest tale that may be told at a royal court. This is the story of the *graal*, from the book the count gave him. Hear how he performs his task” (ll. 57–68; p. 340).⁴

The next 3,000 lines of the poem introduce us to the young Perceval as he leaves his mother and his home and learns about knighthood and honorable behavior. In the midst of his adventures, Perceval finds himself in unknown territory. He rides all day without seeing anyone, and prays to God, “the King of Glory, his true Father,” that he might see his mother again. He comes to a swift river and, following the bank looking for a place to cross, he encounters two men in a boat, one of whom is fishing. The fisherman invites Perceval to lodge with him for the night, and gives him directions to his castle. Perceval finds the castle without problem. He is invited in, and the lord of the castle sits with him in the central hall, lit by a large fire and with “light as bright as candles may furnish in a hall”:

While they talked of this and that, a young attendant entered the room, holding a shining lance by the middle of the shaft. He passed between the fire and those seated on the bed, and all present saw the shining lance with its shining head. A drop of blood fell from the tip of the lance, and that crimson drop ran all the way down to the attendant's hand. The youth who had come there that night beheld this marvel and refrained from asking how this could be. He remembered the warning of the man who had made him a knight, he who had instructed and taught him to guard against speaking too much. The youth feared that if he asked a question, he would be taken for a peasant. He therefore asked nothing.

Two more attendants then entered, bearing in their hands candelabra of fine gold inlaid with niello. Handsome indeed were the attendants carrying the candelabra. On each candelabrum ten candles, at the very least, were burning. Accompanying the attendants was a beautiful, gracious, and elegantly attired young lady holding between her two hands a *graal*. When she entered holding this *graal*, such brilliant illumination appeared that the candles lost their brightness just as the stars and the moon do with the appearance of the sun. Following her was another young lady holding a silver carving platter. The *graal*, which came first, was of fine pure gold, adorned with many kinds of precious jewels, the richest and most costly found on sea or land, those on the *graal* undoubtedly more valuable than any others. Exactly as the lance had done, the *graal* and the platter passed in front of the bed and went from one room into another.

The youth watched them pass and dared not ask who was served from the *graal*, for always he took to heart the words of the wise and worthy man. (ll. 3190–3247; p. 379)

Next a table is set for Perceval (the “youth”) and his host.

The first course was a haunch of venison peppered and cooked in fat. There was no scarcity of clear wines of varied quality to drink from gold cups. An attendant who had brought out the peppered haunch of venison carved it before them on the silver platter, and placed the slices on a large piece of flat bread for the two men.

Meanwhile the *graal* passed before them again, and the youth did not ask who was served from the *graal*. He was afraid because of the worthy man, who had gently warned him against speaking too much, and, remembering this, had his heart always set on it. But he kept silent longer than was necessary. As each course was served, he saw the *graal* pass before them completely uncovered, but did not know who was served from it, and he would have liked to know. Yet he would definitely inquire of one of the court attendants, he said to himself, before his departure, although he would wait until morning, when he took leave of the lord and his entire household. The matter was thus postponed, and he set about drinking and eating. (ll. 3280–3311; p. 380)

The next morning, when Perceval awakes, he finds the castle entirely deserted: “Because he saw the drawbridge lowered, he thought that the attendants had gone into the forest to examine traps and snares. Having no wish to stay longer, he decided to follow them to learn if any of them would tell him, this not being indiscreet, why the lance was bleeding and where the *graal* was being carried” (ll. 3392–3401; p. 381).

He sets off to follow their tracks, and comes upon a young woman under an oak tree lamenting and moaning the death of her lover, whose headless body she holds in her lap. Perceval stops to comfort and aid her, and as they speak she informs him that his host the previous night was the rich Fisher King:

“He certainly showed you great honor by seating you next to him. And tell me now if, when you sat down beside him, you saw the lance with its bleeding tip, though no flesh or vein be there.”

“If I saw it? Yes, on my word.”

“And did you ask why it bled?”

“I never spoke of it.”

“So help me God, know then that you behaved very badly. And did you see the *graal*?”

“Yes.”

“And who held it?”

“A young lady.”

“Whence did she come?”

“From a room. And she went into another, passing in front of me.”

“Did anyone walk ahead of the *graal*?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“Two attendants, no one else.”

“And what did they hold in their hands?”

“Candelabra filled with candles.”

“And who came after the *graal*?”

“A young lady.”

“And what did she hold?”

“A silver platter.”

“Did you ask the people where they were going thus?”

“Not a word left my mouth.”

“So help me God, that is worse. What is your name, friend?”

And the youth, ignorant of his name, had a sudden inspiration and replied that his name was Perceval the Welshman. He did not know whether or not he spoke the truth. And though he did not know, he spoke the truth. When the maiden heard him, she stood up opposite him and told him angrily: “Your name is changed, friend.”

“How?”

“Perceval the wretched! Oh, unfortunate Perceval, what a hapless man you were not to have asked these questions. . . . I am your first cousin, and you are my first cousin. I grieve no less for your misfortune in not learning what is done with the *graal* and to whom it is carried, than for your mother who is dead, or for this knight, whom I loved and cherished.” (ll. 3545–3610; pp. 383–384)

Some 1,500 lines later in the poem Perceval finds himself at King Arthur’s court at Caerleon. In the midst of the rejoicing over his return, a woman arrives riding a mule and holding a whip. Chrétien tells us: “If the book is accurate, there never was a creature so totally foul, even in hell.” This woman proclaims in the midst of the court: “O, Perceval! . . . Damn him who greets you or wishes you well. Why

did you not seize Fortune when you found her? You went to the Fisher King's, and saw the bleeding lance. Was it for you, then, such a great effort to open your mouth and speak that you could not ask why that drop of blood gushed from the gleaming point of the lancehead? You saw the *graal*, and did not ask or inquire what wealthy man was served from it" (ll. 4646–4661; p. 396).

The woman goes on to describe the evil that will ensue from Perceval's failure, and then to convey other news to the court. Then she falls silent, and leaves the court without saying another word. Upon her departure: "Perceval . . . declared that never, his whole life long, would he stay in the same lodging two successive nights, nor, hearing of any perilous passage, fail to cross it, nor fail to go and fight in combat any knight superior in valor to any other, or any two knights together. No anguish would make him abandon the quest until he knew who was served from the *graal* and until he had found the bleeding lance and discerned the true cause of its bleeding" (ll. 4727–4740; p. 397).

At this point Chrétien shifts his attention to another of the Arthurian heroes, Gawain, and his exploits. When next we meet Perceval five years (and some 1,500 lines) have passed:

Of Sir Gawain, the tale is silent here at this point. And so we shall speak of Perceval.

Perceval, so the story says, had so lost his memory that he no longer remembered God. Five times April and May had passed; five whole years had gone by since he worshipped God or His cross in church or minster. Thus had he lived the five years. Yet he did not stint in his pursuit of chivalric deeds. . . .

At the end of five years, he happened to be making his way through a wilderness, full armed as he usually was, when he met five knights escorting as many as ten ladies, their heads hidden within their hoods. All were walking barefoot in woolen rags. The ladies were astonished to see a man coming in armor bearing shield and lance. As penance for their sins, they were themselves proceeding on foot for the salvation of their souls. One of

the five knights stopped him and said: “Stay back! Do you not believe in Jesus Christ, Who wrote down the new law and gave it to Christians? It is surely neither right nor good, but most wrong to bear arms on the day Jesus Christ died.” (ll. 6214–6260; pp. 414–415)

Perceval asks them whence they have come, and they tell him that they have just visited a holy hermit living in the forest, and have taken counsel for their sins and made their confessions. What Perceval hears makes him weep, and he asks the way to the hermit’s abode. Upon finding the hermit in the forest, Perceval enters the chapel and falls on his knees. The hermit bids him make his confession:

“Sir,” he said, “it has been five years since I have known where I was. I have not loved God or believed in Him. Since that time I have done nothing but ill.”

“Oh, dear friend,” said the worthy man, “tell me why you have done so. I beg God to have mercy on the soul of His sinner.”

“Sir, I was once at the home of the Fisher King. I saw the lance with the head that does truly bleed. And about the drop of blood I saw falling from the tip of the shining head, I made no inquiry. Since then, to be certain, I have done nothing to make amends. I saw the *graal* there, but do not know who was served from it. Since then such heavy sorrow has been mine that I would gladly die. Thus have I forgotten the Lord God, for since then I have never implored His mercy or, to my knowledge, done anything to obtain mercy.”

“Oh, dear friend, tell me now your name,” the worthy man said.

And he answered him: “Perceval, sir.”

At this word the worthy man, recognizing his name, sighed. “Brother,” he said, “misfortune has befallen you for a sin of which you are ignorant. This is the grief you caused your mother when you left her. She fell to the ground unconscious at the end of the bridge outside the gate, and died of that grief. Because of the sin you committed there, it came to pass that you did not ask about the lance or the *graal*. Thus evils have befallen you. You would not have survived so long, be certain, had she not commended you to the Lord God. Her prayers had such

power that for her sake God watched over you and protected you from imprisonment and death. Sin cut off your tongue when you did not ask why the lancehead you saw pass before you never ceases to bleed. Foolish were you not to learn who was served from the *graal*. The man who is served from it was my brother. My sister and his was your mother. And as for that rich Fisher King, he is, I believe, the son of this king who has himself served from the *graal*. Do not imagine that it holds pike, lamprey or salmon. With a single host carried to him in the *graal*, we know, he sustains and nourishes his life. Such a holy object is the *graal*, and so pure in spirit is he himself that his life requires no further nourishment than the host that comes in the *graal*. For fifteen years now he has been served in this manner, never leaving the room where you saw the *graal* enter. Now I would instruct you and give you penance for this sin." (ll. 6364–6433; pp. 416–417)

Perceval accepts and performs the penance, hears mass in the hermitage, venerates the cross, and weeping for his sins, humbly repents: "Thus Perceval came to know that God was crucified and died on the Friday. On Easter, Perceval received communion with a pure heart. Here the tale says no more of Perceval. And before you hear me tell more of him, you will have heard much told of Sir Gawain" (ll. 6509–6518; p. 418). The last 2,700 lines of the poem are devoted entirely to Gawain, and the story breaks off unfinished.

Chrétien tells us in his prologue that that he based his story on a book (*livre*) that he had received from his patron, the count of Flanders. What are we to make of this assertion? Scholars remain divided as to the existence of such a written source for Chrétien's romance, with many taking Chrétien at his word, and many others concluding that Chrétien was employing a well-known rhetorical *topos* to add authority and verisimilitude to his romance.⁵ Those who believe that there is a particular written source behind Chrétien's tale rely on the author's supposed veracity in claiming a book as his source. Jean Frappier exemplifies this approach: "The poet was

surely telling the truth in asserting that he had received from his patron a *livre* which contained the story of the Grail.”⁶ But if we are to take Chrétien at his word, we immediately face the problem that centuries of diligent research for such a book have been entirely unproductive.⁷

Nor is there any agreement among scholars on just what sort of book we should be looking for. Frappier goes on to ask: “What, precisely, did the book contain? The answers to this question tend to be influenced by theories concerning the origin of the Grail legend. Some have surmised that the book was written in Latin and described a ritual about a Christian relic; others have maintained—in my opinion with a greater probability—that it was a ‘*conte d'aventure*,’ filled with Celtic marvels.”⁸

Celtic stories and Latin books of liturgy and ceremony abound, but they can scarcely have served as the basis for the story that Chrétien tells about Perceval and the Grail, nor do they fit the description of the *livre* that Chrétien claims to have received from his patron. The sort of book that is required is one that tells a story about Perceval and Gawain, not about Christian rites or Celtic marvels. It is such a book, Chrétien tells us, that he refashioned into rhyming French verse (ll. 65–68).

If we are to take Chrétien at his word about the book that served as his source, we ought also to take him literally when he tells us about its contents. As we have seen, he was not reticent to talk about it; he invokes the book four times in the brief excerpts quoted above. The first time is simply to tell us that he is turning into verse the book given him by the count of Flanders. The second (l. 4617) is to substantiate his description of the ugliness of the woman who appears at Arthur’s court: “If the book is accurate, there never was a creature so totally foul, even in hell.” In the third and fourth instances, Chrétien uses his purported source to explain why he is suddenly leaving one of his heroes and turning to the other. “Of Sir

Gawain, the tale is silent here at this point. And so we shall speak of Perceval" (ll. 6214–6216), and "Here the tale says no more of Perceval. And before you hear me tell more of him, you will have heard much told of Sir Gawain" (ll. 6515–6517).

No surviving book containing "Celtic marvels" or descriptions of a pagan or Christian ritual or relic fits these particular specifications. If we are to take Chrétien at his word, we must look rather for a book that is, at least in its general outlines, very much like the one that Chrétien has produced, and the most careful research, conducted over many centuries, has failed to produce a single likely candidate. I will have more to say about this vexed question in Chapter 8. For the moment it is enough to say that if such a book once existed, it never achieved the kind of popularity that would cause it to be copied and preserved. It is, instead, Chrétien's version of the story of Perceval and the Grail that was built upon by later writers, and that has come down to us. He should be credited, in a very real sense, with creating the story of the Holy Grail as we know it.

What, then, is the *graal* in Chrétien's romance? This is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. It is not even obvious that he, himself, knew what the word meant, or what precisely a *graal* was supposed to be. Chrétien names the *graal* twenty-five times in his *Conte*, but never does he use a synonym or phrase (such as "cup," "platter," "serving bowl," or "dish") to describe it. It is always simply a *graal*. All that we know of it must be gleaned from the action of the story itself. There we learn that the *graal* is carried in the hands of a beautiful maiden, that its radiance outshines all the lights of the hall and of the two accompanying candelabra as the sun does the light of the moon and stars, that it is made of gold and adorned with precious jewels, that it is large enough to contain a large fish such as a pike, a lamprey, or a salmon, and that it actually contains a single eucharistic host (*oiste*).

Before Chrétien made the *graal* famous with his story, the word

itself was uncommon in most of Europe. Well might we ask where the word comes from and what kind of thing it designates. Chrétien would not have found the word in any of his Celtic sources, nor is *graal* derived from a Latin root.⁹ The ultimate origins of the word are apparently to be sought in the language of Northern Spain (Catalonia) and Southern France (Occitania). Its earliest recorded occurrence is in a will or testament of Count Ermengol I of Urgell, written in the year 1010. In his will the count left two silver grails (*gradales*) to the monastery of Sainte Foi, and two silver beakers (*anapes*) to the Church of St. Vincent of Castres.¹⁰ The document is written in Latin, but the word *gradales* is not a Latin word—no such word exists in the Latin lexicon. Rather it is a transliteration of the Catalan name for these silver objects (*gradals*). Another document from the same region, but this time written in the vernacular, preserves the original Catalan names for these objects: In the year 1030 Ermengarda, daughter of Count Borrell of Barcelona, bequeathed in her testament “vessels of gold and silver, namely five beakers (*en-apos*) and two grails (*gradals*), two cups (*copes*) and five cooking vessels (*cuylares*).”¹¹ In a document from the same region, in the thirteenth century, the king is said to have received from the people of Perpignan a large number of gifts, including some “bowls (*cifis*), platters (*scutellis*), and grails (*grasalibus*).”¹² Joan Corominas summarizes the historical and philological evidence for the origins of the word “grail”: “It concerns the Catalan *greala* ‘escudella’ [i.e., basin or bowl] (archaic Catalan *gradal*, f.), old-Occitan *grazala*, old-French *graal*, old-Castilian *greal*. Even though the legend of the Holy Grail spread from the north of France, the word came from Catalonia and Occitania, where it designates utensils of domestic use, and seems to be a further derivative of [the Catalan] word *gresa* [potter’s clay].”¹³

Although the word *graal* was not common in literature before Chrétien made it famous, he might have heard about such a thing in the epic poem *Girart de Roussillon*, written sometime between 1136

and 1180, where “grails” with gold decoration (*greaus ab aur batuz*) are mentioned in passing, along with goblets, basins, and vessels (*orçols*) both large and small. The same poem mentions “goblets, grails, candelabra” in an enumeration of precious objects.¹⁴ He might also have known one of the versions of the *Roman d’Alexandre*, written perhaps around 1170, where, in a brief episode, a pilgrim is described as sitting down as a guest at a knight’s table, where he “drank from a cup of pure gold” and “ate with him from his *graal*.¹⁵ In both of these stories the thing called a grail merits only passing mention, but both confirm that the word designated a type of tableware or serving dish, just as Chrétien seems to have imagined it.

It is from such mundane materials that Chrétien (or one of his predecessors) fashioned an image of the Grail. He imagined it as a precious serving dish, made of gold and decorated with gemstones, large enough to contain a large fish such as a pike, or lamprey, or salmon. In his story the Grail is a radiant and holy thing (*tant sainte chose*) and it plays the central, if enigmatic, role in “the finest tale that may be told at royal court.” Whether or not Chrétien drew on pre-existing stories, written or oral, about Perceval and a vessel called a grail, it is his romance that serves as the starting point and touchstone for all subsequent developments of the legend. The poets and storytellers of the next generation will take up where Chrétien left off. In trying to complete, or elaborate, or improve on Chrétien’s unfinished tale, they will wrestle with the question of the Grail, and they will invent a surprising array of answers as to what this holy object is, and why it is so important.

CHAPTER 2

Wolfram von Eschenbach

Parzival

The success of Chrétien de Troyes' poetic invention is astonishing. Within a very few years, storytellers across Europe had taken up the theme of the Grail, elaborating and modifying Chrétien's tale, adding new twists and turns to the story, and probing the image of the Grail to discover where it came from and what it might mean. The primary means of discovery, of course, was poetic invention, and poets from across Christendom vied with each other to tell the story of the Grail in ways that would delight and enlighten their audiences.¹

The most elaborate and inventive retelling of Chrétien's story of Perceval's quest for the Grail was produced by Wolfram von Eschenbach in his *Parzival*, written probably between 1200 and 1212.² Wolfram, a native of Bavaria in southern Germany, did most of his writing between the years 1195 and 1225. All that we know of him is gleaned from his surviving literary works and from popular traditions that grew up about him soon after his death. He composed a number of early love poems, and, at the end of his career, an epic poem about William of Toulouse (*Willehalm*) and a story about the young love of Parzival's great-grandfather, Titurel ("Titurel fragments").³ But it is for his retelling of the Parzival story that Wolfram was best known in his own day, and, thanks especially to Richard Wagner's music-drama *Parsifal*, in our own.

There is no doubt that Wolfram's primary inspiration for his *Parzival* is Chrétien's French tale, the *Conte du Graal*. He knows Chrétien's work intimately, and treats it as the primary, if incomplete and otherwise insufficient, source of the story of Parzival and the Grail. But where Chrétien's poem tells a story that is simple and understated, Wolfram's is the stuff of grand opera. For example, Wolfram includes two books at the beginning of his sixteen-book (nearly 25,000-line) poem that trace Parzival's ancestry back to the marriage of Gahmuret of Anjou with Herzloyde, the granddaughter of Titurel and sister of four other characters (Anfortas, Trevrizen, Schoysiane, and Repanse de Schoye). Parzival's father, Gahmuret, had another son, Feirefiz, by his first wife, Belecane, the pagan queen of an oriental realm called Zazamanc—all of this by way of prologue. These two books illustrate the fecundity of imagination and of learning that Wolfram brought to his retelling of Chrétien's story and show how he left no stone unturned in his efforts to provide new material to fill out Chrétien's spare and cryptic story. Characters who were enigmatic and often nameless in Chrétien's poem are here provided not only with names, but also with histories that at once explain and elaborate the original tale.

Wolfram's Book Three begins, like Chrétien's tale, with Parzival's mother and her vain attempt to keep Parzival from learning about knights and knighthood. The Grail first appears in Book Five, where Parzival arrives at the mysterious castle of the rich fisherman. Wolfram's version of the story is remarkably like Chrétien's, only more sumptuous. Where Chrétien speaks simply of a central hall lit by a large fire and "light as bright as candles may furnish in a hall," Wolfram describes "a hall where a hundred chandeliers were hanging with many candles set upon them high over the heads of the company, and with candles round its walls. . . . They had not thought it too extravagant to have three square andirons in marble masonry on which was burning a fire of aloes-wood. . . . Those [fireplaces]

were magnificent pieces of workmanship!" (5, 229, 24–230, 14; pp. 122–123).⁴

As Parzival and his host are seated in the hall, a young man rushes in at the door bearing a lance from whose point blood flows and runs down the shaft. Whereas Chrétien simply describes the boy and the bleeding lance without comment, Wolfram expands and interprets the scene for us. He tells us how the lance evoked grief in those who saw it: "There was weeping and wailing throughout the spacious hall, the people of thirty lands could not have wept so much." And he adds that the grief was called forth by some well-known (but unidentified) sorrow of which they were reminded by the bleeding lance (5, 231, 17–232, 4; pp. 124–125).

The Grail procession that follows is also like Chrétien's, but much more detailed. First come a pair of noble maidens, each bearing a golden candelabrum; one, Wolfram tells us, is the Countess of Tenabroc, and the other her companion. These two are followed by a duchess and her companion, carrying two ivory table-trestles. Then eight more ladies enter, four carrying large candles and the other four a precious stone, a "garnet-hyacinth," that serves as the tabletop for the lord of the castle and his guest. These eight ladies are followed by the two more carrying silver knives on napkins. These in turn are accompanied by four maidens bearing lights for the table service. After the table is set, six more maidens enter, accompanied by the queen (*Künigen*) and the Grail: "So radiant was her face that all imagined the sun had risen. She wore a dress of Arabian silk. Upon a green achmardi [a cloth] she bore the consummation of heart's desire, its root and its blossoming—a thing called 'The Gral,' transcending all earthly perfection! She whom the Gral permitted to be its bearer was named Repanse de Schoye. Such was the nature of the Gral that she who had care of it must guard her purity and renounce all falsity" (5, 235, 15–22; p. 125).

Other than the fact that it is the queen's face, and not the Grail

itself, that shines like the sun, nothing in this is at odds with Chrétien's description of the *graal*. Wolfram furnishes many new details, but the Grail remains an enigmatic and undefined thing, carried reverently by a maiden.

Little mention is made here of a man being served by the Grail in an inner room; rather Wolfram describes the Grail as feeding a large company of knights and ladies: "Whatever one stretched out one's hand for in the presence of the Gral, it was found all ready and to hand—dishes warm, dishes cold, new-fangled dishes and old favourites, the meat of beasts both tame and wild. . . . 'There never was any such thing!' many will be tempted to say. But they would be misled by their ill temper, for the Gral was the very fruit of bliss, a cornucopia of the sweets of this world and such that it scarcely fell short of what they tell us of the Heavenly Kingdom" (5, 238, 2–25; pp. 126–127).

After each has been served according to his desire, and "the frugal man and the glutton equally had their fill," the banquet ends. Each lady again performs her service, "those who had been last now were first." Then they bring the queen to the Grail, and she and all the young ladies bow gracefully to both their lord and Parzival, and carry back through the door what they brought in with such ceremony (5, 240, 10–22; pp. 127–128).

As in Chrétien's romance, Parzival awakes the next morning and finds the castle deserted. Riding in search of the noble company who inhabited the castle the previous evening, he stumbles across a maiden bewailing her dead lover. She asks Parzival where he spent the night, and then proceeds to tell him about the castle and its lord, about himself, and about the Grail:

"[The castle's] name is Munsalvæsche, and the broad realm around it is called Terre de Salvæsche. Ancient Titurel bequeathed it to his son King Frimutel. . . . He left four noble children, of whom three, for all their lofty rank, live in misery.

The fourth lives in humble poverty and this he does as penance in God's name. His name is Trevrizent. His brother Anfortas can only lean—he can neither ride nor walk, nor yet lie down or stand. He is lord of Munsalvæsche and God's displeasure has not spared him. If you had made your way to that sorrowing company, sir," she continued, "that lord would have been rid of the suffering he has borne all this long time."

"I saw great marvels there," Parzival told the maiden, "and many fair ladies." She knew him by his voice.

"You are Parzival!" she said. "Tell me, did you see the Gral and his lordship all desolate of joy? Tell me the glad tidings! If an end has been put to his agony, happy you for your Heaven-blest journey! For you shall reign over all that air enfolds, creatures wild and tame shall minister to you!" (5, 251, 2–252, 8; pp. 132–133)

Parzival hesitates to confess the unhappy outcome of his visit to the castle. He recognizes the maiden as Sigune, his cousin, and she reminds him again about the glory and riches that would be his, " 'If you duly asked the Question! 'I did not ask it,' said he. 'Alas, that you are in my sight,' said the sorrowful maid, 'since you failed so abjectly to ask! You witnessed such great marvels!—To think that you failed to ask in the very presence of the Gral! And you saw all those blameless ladies, noble Garschiloye and Repanse de Schoye, the keen-edged silver and the Bloody Lance! O why did you come to me? You dishonourable person, man accurst! . . . You should have had compassion on your host, in whom God had worked a terrible sign, and inquired about his suffering. You live, yet as far as Heaven's favour goes you are dead! ' " (5, 255, 1–20; p. 135).

Nothing more is said of the Grail until the end of Book 6, when Parzival reaches King Arthur's court in the "vale of Plimizoel," and the joy of reunion with his companions is interrupted by the arrival of a messenger bearing bad news. In Chrétien's romance this messenger is the loathsome maiden—"more foul than any creature, even in hell." Wolfram preserves Chrétien's characterization, but adds a

great deal to his description of the maiden, preparing us to accept a more elaborate role for her in his story: “Here came she of whom I must speak, a maiden much praised for integrity, but whose manners were quite crazy. Her news brought pain to many. . . . She was so talented that she spoke all languages—Latin, Arabic and French. She was on easy terms with such learned matters as dialectic and geometry, and she had mastered astronomy. Her name was Cundrie, her surname ‘The Sorceress.’ Her tongue suffered no impediment, for what it said was quite enough. With it she killed all rejoicing” (6, 312, 2–30; pp. 162–163).

Like Chrétien’s damsels, Cundrie comes riding on a mule, but Wolfram observes that it is a noble beast, and great care has gone into the making of its costly bridle and harness. Moreover, she is handsomely attired in a fine blue cape from Ghent, cut in the latest French fashion, and a hat from London, decorated with peacock feathers and lined with cloth-of-gold. Wolfram grants, with Chrétien, that she is unlovely: “She herself did not look like a lady.” He describes her hair as “long, black, tough, not altogether lovely,” her nose as like a dog’s, her ears like a bear’s, and her fingernails like lion’s claws, and a pair of tusks jut from her jaws. He concludes: “Seldom were lances broken for her love” (6, 313, 1–314, 10; pp. 163–164).

As in Chrétien’s tale, the loathsome damsels upbraids Parzival for failing to ask the question. She adds that it was his failure of compassion that made the fault so serious: “‘Now explain to me, Sir Parzival, how it came about that when the sorrowful Angler was sitting there, joyless and despondent, you failed to free him from his sighs! He made the load of grief he bore apparent to your eyes. O heartless guest! You ought to have had compassion on his sufferings’” (6, 315, 26–316, 2; p. 164).

Wolfram elaborates Chrétien’s simple story with many details about the reaction at court to this loathsome visitor. One of Wolf-

ram's newly invented characters, an "infidel lady" visiting King Arthur's court, consoles Parzival and then reveals more about his lineage and about his infidel half-brother, Feirefiz. Parzival's response is the same as in Chrétien's version—he dedicates himself to a search for the Grail:

This discerning infidel lady, who was also very rich, had acquired the facility of speaking excellent French, and Parzival answered her in these terms.

"May God reward you, madam, for consoling me so kindly. Yet I cannot shake off my sorrow. . . . I shall never own myself happy until I have seen the Gral, whether the time be short or long. My thoughts drive me to that goal, and never shall I swerve from it until the end of my days. . . . Great sorrow will attend me such as brings heart's rain to eyes, seeing that I, alas, left *how many?* lovely maidens up at Munsalvæsche, and so was cast out from true happiness. For whatever wonders men have told about, the Gral has more! Its lord lives out a wretched life.—Helpless Anfortas, what help was it to you that I was at your side?" (6, 329, 11–330, 30; pp. 171–172)

After this exchange, all the knights take leave of one another and set out on their respective ways. In Chrétien's romance, Perceval leaves the court and wanders for more than four years in search of the Grail, entirely forgetful of God during that time. Wolfram describes more clearly Parzival's psychological state. He tells how Gawan (Gawain) embraced Parzival and wished him God's blessing, but Parzival replies: "'Alas, what is God? . . . Were He all-powerful, he would not have brought us to such shame! Ever since I knew of Grace I have been in His service. But now I will quit His service! If He hates me, I will shoulder that hate'" (6, 332, 1–8; p. 172). With this heartfelt cry Parzival rides away.

Here at the end of Book Six Wolfram threatens to tell no more of the story: "Now let a man who is adept in romancing and skilled in poetry take this story and end it" (6, 337, 10–11; p. 175). Had he stopped here his name would scarcely be counted among the great

contributors to Arthurian romance or to the story of the Grail. Up to this point he has introduced some new characters and events, as well as a wealth of description and explanation not found in Chrétien's *Conte*, but little in the way of genuine development or poetic invention. About the Grail itself Wolfram is particularly, and uncharacteristically, silent. His description in Book 5 of its first appearance is more sumptuous, one might even say more carnal, than Chrétien's analogous account, but it adds little of significance to our understanding of what the Grail is, or why it should be so important. Wolfram's performance thus far scarcely prepares us for the revelations about the Grail that he has in store in Book Nine. These inventions, along with Wolfram's conclusion of the story which Chrétien had left unfinished, were to have a lasting influence on accounts of the Grail in all subsequent generations.

In Books Seven and Eight, Wolfram, still following Chrétien's tale closely, takes up the story of Gawain: "This story will now rest for a while with one who never did a shameful deed—with Gawan, famed as a man of worth. For this tale takes friendly note of many beside or beyond its hero Parzival" (7, 338, 1–7; p. 176). Midway through Book Eight, in the midst of an account of Gawain's meeting with a king and his men, Wolfram springs on his audience the first of his surprises by introducing a completely unexpected source for his tale: "After this speech one of the King's men stood forward that went by the name of Liddamus. Kyot himself names him so. Now Kyot *laschantiure* [the enchanter? (*l'enchanteur*), the singer? (*le chanteur*)] was the name of one whose art compelled him to tell what shall gladden no few. Kyot is that noted Provençal who saw this Tale of Parzival written in the heathenish tongue [i.e., Arabic], and what he retold in French I shall not be too dull to recount in German" (8, 416, 17–30; pp. 213–214).

From this point on, Kyot the Provençal will regularly be invoked as the authority guaranteeing the accuracy and truthfulness of Wolf-

ram's tale. We will discuss, below, the question of the identity, and the very existence, of this "famous" Provençal poet and scholar. It is to the authority of "Kyot," and to the inspiration of his (and Kyot's) muse, Lady Adventure, that Wolfram turns when, in Book Nine, he makes his most memorable contributions to the legends of the Grail.

Returning to the story of Parzival, Book Nine begins with an appearance of Wolfram's muse, Lady Adventure, who cries:

"Open!"

"To Whom? Who is there?"

"I wish to enter your heart."

"Then you want too narrow a space."

"How is that? Can't I just squeeze in? I promise not to jostle you. I want to tell you marvels."

"Can it be you, Lady Adventure? How do matters stand with that fine fellow?—I mean with noble Parzival, whom with harsh words Cundrie drove out to seek the Gral, a quest from which there was no deterring him, despite the weeping of many ladies. He left Arthur the Briton then: but how is he faring now? Take up the tale and tell us. . . . Recount his achievements in detail. Has he seen Munsalvaesche again and gentle Anfortas, whose heart was so fraught with sighs? Please tell us—how it would console us!—whether he has been released from suffering? Let us hear whether Parzival has been there, he who is your lord as much as mine. . . . Tell me how he lives and all that he does." (9, 433, 1–434, 10; p. 222)

Here Wolfram takes up once more the story of Parzival. As he is riding through a forest, Parzival meets his cousin Sigune, the lady who had earlier revealed to Parzival his name and his failure in not asking about the Grail. In Wolfram's story, Sigune has now retired to an anchoress's cell in the forest to live out her days in prayer and fasting. Parzival questions her about her way of life, and about how she finds sustenance in this deserted place. She replies that her food is brought to her from the Gral by Cundrie la Surziere every Satur-

day evening. Then she says to Parzival: “ ‘Tell me how you have fared with regard to the Gral? Have you at last got to know what kind of thing it is? Or what turn has your quest now taken?’ ‘I have forfeited much happiness in that endeavour,’ he told the well-born maiden. ‘The Gral gives me no few cares. I left a land where I wore the crown, and a most lovable wife, too, than whom no fairer person was ever born of human kind. I long for her gentle courtesy, and often pine for her love—yet even more for that high goal as to how to see Munsalvæsche and the Gral! For this has not yet come to pass’ ” (9, 440, 30–441, 14; p. 226).

Sigune tells Parzival that Cundrie has ridden away quite recently, and Parzival can follow her to Munsalvæsche. Parzival follows the track of Cundrie’s mule for some distance, but finally loses it in the thick undergrowth of the forest. While deciding where next to go, Parzival is confronted by a knight who challenges him: “ ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘it displeases me that you beat a track through my lord’s forest in this fashion. I shall give you a reminder such as you will regret. Munsalvæsche is unaccustomed to having anyone ride so near without fighting a desperate battle or offering such amends as those beyond our forest call death’ ” (9, 443, 12–20; p. 227).

Wolfram identifies this knight as a Templar (*Templeis*), and one of the company of knights of Munsalvæsche who guard the Grail.⁵ Parzival defeats the knight, takes his horse, and rides off grieving “that the Gral kept so aloof from him” (9, 445, 27–30; p. 228).

He rides on for some weeks until he meets a knight, his wife, and two daughters in a great forest. They are, Wolfram tells us, “on their pilgrimage of Confession.” As in Chrétien’s story, the knight reproaches Parzival for riding armed in such a holy season, rather than “going barefoot in observance of the Day.” Parzival responds: “ ‘Sir, I have no idea when the year begins or the number of the passing weeks. . . . I used to serve one named God till it pleased Him to ordain such vile shame for me. Told to look to Him for help, I never

failed Him in devotion: yet now His help has failed me' " (9, 447, 20–30; p. 229).

The knight proceeds to instruct Parzival:

"Do you mean God born of the Virgin?" asked the grey knight. "If you believe that He became a man and what He suffered for our sake on this day, this armour ill beseems you. Today is Good Friday, when the whole world can rejoice and at the same time mourn in anguish. Where was greater loyalty seen than that shown by God for our sakes when they hung Him on the cross? If you are of the Christian faith, sir, let this traffic afflict you: He bartered His noble life in death in order to redeem our debt, in that mankind was damned and destined to Hell for our sins. Unless you are a heathen, sir, remember what day this is. Ride on along our tracks. Not far ahead there lives a holy man: he will advise you and allot penance for your misdeed. If you show yourself contrite, he will take your sins away." (9, 448, 2–26; pp. 229–230)

Parzival listens attentively to the knight (although his thoughts are somewhat distracted by the beauty of the daughters). He rides on into the forest, thinking about what he has heard, and asks, grudgingly, for God's help: "If this is His Helpful Day, then let Him help, if help He can!" He loosens the reins of his horse, and spurs him on in whatever direction God should choose. The horse heads straight for Fontane la Salvæsche, where Parzival finds the holy hermit, Trevrizen. What follows is the centerpiece, both literally and artistically, of Wolfram's poem.

From Trevrizen, Parzival is about to learn matters concerning the Gral that have been hidden. Those who questioned me earlier and were angry with me for not telling them earned nothing but shame. Kyot asked me to conceal it because Adventure forbade him to mention it till she reached that point where it has to be spoken of.

The famous Master Kyot found the first source of this tale in heathenish [i.e., Arabic] script, neglected, in Toledo. He had had to learn the abc's beforehand without the art of necromancy. It

helped him that he was baptized—otherwise this tale would still be unknown. No infidel art would avail us to reveal the nature of the Gral and how one comes to know its mysteries.

There was a heathen named Flegetanis who was highly renowned for his learning. This same physicus [i.e., master of natural philosophy] was descended from Solomon, and born of a family which had long been Israelite, until Baptism became our shield against hellfire. He wrote of the adventures of the Gral. Flegetanis, who worshiped a calf as though it were his god, was a heathen [i.e., Muslim] by his father.—How can the Devil bring people so wise to such a shameful pass, in that He whose power is greatest and to whom all wonders are known neither does nor did not part them from their folly? For the infidel Flegetanis was able to define for us the recession of each planet and its return, and how long each revolves in its orbit before it stands at its mark again. All human kind are affected by the revolutions of the planets. With his own eyes the heathen Flegetanis saw—and he spoke of it reverentially—hidden mysteries in the constellations. He declared there was a thing called the Gral, whose name he read clearly in the stars. “A troop [of angels] left it on earth and then rose high above the stars, if their innocence drew them back again. Since then baptized people have had the duty of keeping it. Those humans who are summoned to the Gral are ever worthy.” Thus did Flegetanis write on this theme.

The wise Master Kyot set out to find this tale in Latin books, to learn where there may have been a people worthy to keep the Gral and follow a pure life. He read the chronicles of various lands in “Britain” and elsewhere, in France and Ireland; but it was in Anjou that he found the tale. He read the truth about Mazadan—the account of the latter’s whole lineage was faithfully recorded there—and on the distaff side how Titurel and his son Frimutel bequeathed the Gral to Anfortas, whose sister was Herzeloyde [Parzival’s mother] by whom Gahmuret begot a son to whom this tale belongs, and who is now riding along the fresh tracks left by the grey knight that met with him. (9, 452, 28–455, 24; pp. 231–233)

There is a riot of invention in these few lines. The muse of romance (Lady Adventure) governs Wolfram’s story; but she is dis-

tinct from the sources on which the poet claims to base his tale. “Kyot” is said to have found the source materials for his (and thus for Wolfram’s) story in an Arabic manuscript in Toledo, a center of Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin scientific learning. The Arabic text was written by one Flegetanis, and told how he had learned about the Gral from studying the stars and planets. In this Arabic text, Kyot is said to have found not only the story of the Grail, come down from the heavens, but also brief mention of a hereditary line of virtuous humans charged with protecting the Grail. Kyot then went off in search of a Latin book that would tell the story of these Grail-keepers. He searched in vain the chronicles and histories of Britain (i.e., Brittany), France, and even Ireland, but finally found the story in Anjou. Under the inspiration of Lady Adventure, Kyot then wove his romance out of the information he had found both in the Latin book from Anjou and in Flegetanis’s original scientific account, written in Arabic.

Despite the concerted efforts of scholars and researchers from the thirteenth century to the present, no trace has been found of any of these purported sources, whether Kyot’s Provençal romance, or Flegetanis’s Arabic treatise, or a Latin chronicle from Anjou telling of the noble line of Grail-keepers.⁶ The search will no doubt continue, but until other evidence is found it would seem best to consider that all three are the creations of Wolfram’s storytelling art.⁷ It is enough for us to say that Wolfram thought it plausible that the story of the Grail had its origins in Spain, that it was the subject of a Provençal poem, and that its warders, the Templars, should be associated with the house of Anjou.

Returning to the story, Wolfram tells how Parzival arrived at Fontane la Salvæsche, and finds there the holy hermit Trevrizen. The hermit invites Parzival into his cell with the words: “If Adventure has brought you out with an eye to winning love’s reward and it is true love you serve, then love, as love is now in season. This is

Love's day! After that serve women for their favour. But please do dismount, if I may invite you" (9, 9, 456, 16–22; p. 233).

Parzival dismounts and addresses the hermit: "Sir," he said, "guide me now: I am a sinner." The hermit begins gently to question Parzival, and leads him gradually toward contrition for his sins: "'Only now,' said Parzival, 'do I realize how long I have been wandering with no sense of direction and bereft of joy. . . . All this time I was never seen to enter any church or minster where God's praise was sung. All I sought was battle. I bear great hatred of God, since He stands godfather to my troubles. . . . If He is truly prompt to help He does not help me—for all the help they tell of Him!'" (9, 460, 28–461, 26; pp. 235–236).

Although a layman and not a cleric, the holy hermit is able to read and understand the Scriptures. He replies in expert fashion and at length to Parzival's complaint against God and to his doubts about the Christian mysteries (9, 462, 11–467, 10; pp. 236–238). He then invites Parzival to confess his sins:

"Unless you do not wish to divulge them, I should like to hear your sins and sorrows," replied his host. "If you will let me judge of them I might well be able to give advice you could not give yourself."

"My deepest distress is for the Gral," replied Parzival. "After that it is for my wife, than whom no fairer creature was ever given suck by mother. I languish and pine for them both."

"You are right, sir," said his host. "The sorrow you suffer is as it should be, since you long for the wife that is yours. If you are found in holy wedlock, then, though you suffer the pains of Hell, your torment shall soon end, and you will be loosed from your bonds immediately through God's help. You say you long for the Gral? You foolish man—this I must deplore! For no man can win the Gral other than one who is known in Heaven and destined for it. This much I have to say about the Gral, for I know it and have seen it for myself."

"Were you there?" asked Parzival.

"Indeed, sir," was his host's reply. (9, 467, 19–468, 16; pp. 238–239)

Parzival does not yet admit to the hermit that he, too, has been to Munsalvæsche, and that he failed to ask the question. Instead he inquires about the Gral, and the hermit obliges him by revealing things that have never before been told about it.

“Well I know,” said his host, “that many brave knights dwell in Munsalvæsche with the Gral. Always they ride out in search of adventure. They do so for their sins, these templars, whether in victory or defeat. . . . I will tell you how they are nourished. They live from a Stone of purest kind. If you have never heard of it I shall name it for you here. It is called ‘*Lapsit exillis*.’⁸ By virtue of this Stone the Phoenix is burned to ashes, in which he is reborn! . . . Further: however ill a mortal may be, from the day on which he sees the Stone he cannot die for that week, nor does he lose his color. For if anyone, maid or man, were to look at the Gral for two hundred years, you would have to say that his color was as fresh as in his early prime, except that his hair would be grey!—Such powers does the Stone confer on mortal men that their flesh and bones are soon made young again. This Stone is also called ‘The Gral.’” (9, 468, 23–469, 28; p. 239)

Nothing has prepared us for this last revelation that the Gral is a stone. This is perhaps Wolfram’s most distinctive innovation. Perhaps Wolfram was unfamiliar with the meaning of the uncommon word *graal* as he found it in Chrétien’s story. As we saw in Chapter 1, the word has its origins in Catalan and Occitan, and it was rarely used in French literature before Chrétien made it famous. It has no roots or cognates in German. Finding no clear description in Chrétien’s story of what this thing called a *graal* is, and why it was so precious and powerful, Wolfram may have felt compelled to find a suitable answer, and chose to describe it as a stone with mystical and cosmic powers. Or perhaps he recognized that Chrétien’s *graal* was a serving dish or bowl, and he found this explanation inadequate to the story and unworthy of the thing. Whatever the case, Wolfram imagines the Grail as a most precious stone.⁹

The hermit continues his discourse:

“Today a Message alights upon the Gral governing its highest virtue, for today is Good Friday, when one can always see a dove wing its way down from Heaven. It brings a small white wafer to the Stone and leaves it there. The dove, all dazzling white, then flies up to Heaven again. Every Good Friday, as I say, the Dove brings it to the Stone, from which the Stone receives all that is good on earth of food and drink.”

“As to those who are named to the Gral, hear how they are made known. On the stone, around the edge, an inscription announces the name and lineage of each one, girl or boy, who is to make this blessed journey. . . . They are fetched from many lands, and are forever after protected from the shame of sin. When they die here in this world, Paradise is theirs in the next.”

“When Lucifer and the Trinity began to war with each other, those who did not take sides, worthy, noble angels, had to descend to earth to that Stone which is forever incorruptible. I do not know whether God forgave them or damned them in the end; if it was right, He took them back. Since that time the Stone has been in the care of those whom God appointed to it and to whom He sent his angel. This, sir, is how matters stand regarding the Gral.” (9, 469, 29–471, 29; p. 240)

Although Wolfram will later retract his suggestion that some angels declined to choose sides in the war between God and Satan and were imprisoned in the Grail-stone while awaiting judgment,¹⁰ he has provided here perhaps the first and certainly one of the most inventive descriptions of the nature and the characteristics of the Grail. Subsequent writers will offer alternative histories and explanations, but few will be entirely free of the influence exercised by Wolfram’s account.

Parzival continues his conversations with the holy hermit for two weeks. In that time he learns much more about the Grail: only those who are summoned by it to Munsalvæsche can see the Grail. The heraldic device of the Grail-company is the turtle-dove. The Grail is so heavy that sinful mortals are unable to lift it. The lord and protector of the Grail and its company is Anfortas, Parzival’s mater-

nal uncle. Anfortas had been wounded by a poisoned lance while jousting with a heathen in a distant land. His wound festered and no known remedies were able to heal it: not blood from a pelican, not unicorn's heart, not even dragon-wort. Only a knight who would ask the question could end Anfortas's suffering.

Upon hearing this last, Parzival confesses that he has been to Munsalvæsche, seen all the marks of suffering, and nevertheless he asked no question. The hermit then encourages Parzival to do penance for his misdeeds. He gently questions Parzival further, like a good confessor: "Nephew, I still have not heard from you how you got this horse. . . . Did the man survive to whom it belongs by right? . . . If you are for robbing the people of the Gral in this fashion . . . your mind is riven with contradictions" (9, 500, 1–22; p. 254).¹¹ He concludes with a brief pastoral exhortation: "'If you wish to make something fine and truly noble of your life, you must never treat a woman ill [and] you should treat priests well.' 'Give me your sins!' said Trevirizent with all solemnity. 'I shall vouch for your penitence before God. And do as I have instructed you: let nothing daunt you in this endeavour.' They took their leave of one another. Elaborate how, if you wish" (9, 502, 4–30; p. 255).

In Book Ten, Wolfram, following Chrétien's lead, returns to the story of Gawain. About one-third of the way through Book Thirteen, Wolfram reaches the point where Chrétien's story had broken off, incomplete, and had been followed in the majority of manuscripts by three anonymous continuations. Wolfram follows the outline of the first continuator, almost to the end of Book Fourteen.¹² Only there does Wolfram part company completely with Chrétien's story. In Books Fifteen and Sixteen Wolfram brings the Parzival story to a conclusion of his own devising, one that was rich and satisfying in his own time and has remained popular into our own.

Wolfram begins Book Fifteen with a reference to others who

have tried and failed to complete Chrétien's story of Parzival and the Grail: "Many people have grown impatient at the Sequel's being locked away from them. Some I could name failed to fathom it, hard though they tried. I shall now withhold it no longer, but make it known to you in plain narrative, since in my mouth I bear the lock to the story of how gentle, handsome Anfortas was made well again. The Adventure tells us how the Queen of Belrepeire [Condwiramurs, Parzival's wife] kept her heart chaste and pure until she reached the place of her reward and entered a realm of high bliss. Parzival shall bring this to pass, if my skill avails me" (15, 734, 1–16; p. 366).

In Book Fifteen Wolfram is on his own with respect to the Grail story. Here he stresses his favorite themes: that the Grail is won both through courtly love (*minne*) and through the Christian faith and its sacraments. The story begins with Parzival meeting and fighting an infidel knight of consummate courage and skill who turns out to be his half-brother, Feirefiz: "The Infidel's desire was for love and the winning of fame. . . . The handsome unchristened man aspired to women's reward: it was for this that he adorned himself so elegantly. His high heart compelled him to strive for noble love" (15, 736, 1–23; p. 367).

As the fierce battle continues, Wolfram comments:

The Infidel was gaining the upper hand: what am I to do with the Christian? Unless he turns his thoughts towards Love, this battle will gain him death at this Infidel's hands.—Prevent this, O potent Gral, and radiant Condwiramurs! The man who serves you both stands here in the greatest peril he ever knew! . . .

Why are you so slow, Parzival, not fixing your thoughts on that chaste and lovely woman, your wife? Have you no wish to live on?

The Infidel was accompanied by two things on which his best strength depended. First, he cherished a love enshrined in his heart with constancy. Second, there were precious stones which with their pure and noble virtues gave him spirit and

enhanced his strength. It vexes me that the Christian is growing weary from fighting, from forward rushes and the dealing of strong blows. If neither Condwiramurs nor the Gral are able to come to his aid, then, valiant Parzival, you could have one thought to hearten you: that the charming, handsome boys Kardeiz and Loherangrin—whom his wife had conceived from his last embraces—should not be left fatherless so soon! If you ask me, children chastely begotten are a man's supreme blessing. (15, 740, 13–22, 742, 27–743, 22; pp. 369, 370)

Exhausted by the battle, they sit down to rest, and in the ensuing conversation they recognize each other as brothers. Feirefiz agrees to accompany Parzival to King Arthur's court: “In return, you shall be shown ladies of radiant beauty,” Parzival told his brother, ‘and the delight which they occasion, and also many courtly knights of your own noble lineage. For Arthur the Briton lies encamped here with his illustrious following. I took leave of them only this morning, together with a most charming company—we shall indeed see comely ladies there.’ When the Infidel heard women named—they were his very life—he said ‘Take me with you’” (15, 753, 25–754, 7; p. 375).

At court, Feirefiz is welcomed and admired by all, and on the following day he is admitted to the company of the Round Table. As they are all feasting and celebrating, Cundrie, the loathsome damsels, appears in their midst. She addresses Parzival: “‘O happy son of Gahmuret! God is about to manifest his Grace in you! . . . Now be modest and yet rejoice! O happy man, for your high gains, you crown of man's felicity! The Inscription has been read: you are to be the Lord of the Gral! Your wife Condwiramurs and your son Loherangrin have both been assigned there with you. . . . Your truthful lips are now to address noble, gentle King Anfortas and with their Question banish his agony and heal him’” (15, 778, 13–15, 781, 11–30; p. 387).

Cundrie allows Parzival to choose one man as his companion, and promises to guide him to Munsalvæsche and the Grail. Parzival

chooses his half-brother, Feirefiz, and addresses Arthur's court: "He told them all in French, as Trevrizen [the hermit] had declared when he was with him, that no man could ever win the Gral by force 'except the one who is summoned there by God.' The news spread to every land that it was not to be won by force, with the result that many abandoned the quest of the Gral and all that went with it, and that is why it is hidden to this day" (15, 786, 1–12; p. 389). Book Fifteen ends with Cundrie, Parzival, and Feirefiz riding off toward the Grail.

In Book Sixteen we find ourselves in the Grail castle, where Anfortas is despairing of ever being cured. He asks his companions to put him out of his misery by killing him, and they would have done so, had Trevrizen not given them hope that someone would come a second time and ask the liberating question. They carry Anfortas to the Gral, and for another week "he was made to live against his will and not to die" (16, 788, 13–29; p. 392).

As Cundrie, Parzival, and Feirefiz approach the Grail castle, they are met by a company of Templars in full armor. Parzival and Feirefiz make ready to charge, but Cundrie seizes the bridle of Parzival's horse and explains that the Grail-company is ready to serve and obey him in all things. The three are brought into Anfortas's presence. He continues to despair and asks Parzival to let him die. Parzival is moved to tears. He says: "'Tell me where the Gral is kept. If God's goodness triumphs in me, all these people shall be witnesses.' Then, facing in that direction, he genuflected thrice in honour of the Trinity, praying that help might be given for this sorrowful man's pain of heart. He rose to his feet again and asked: 'Dear Uncle, what ails you?'" Immediately Anfortas is cured: "The lustre which the French call 'fleur' entered his complexion—Parzival's beauty was as nothing beside it, and that of Absalom son of David, and Vergulaht of Ascalun, and of all that handsome race . . . the beauty of none of these was equal to that which Anfortas carried out from his illness. God's artistry is still enough" (16, 795, 21–796, 16; pp. 394–395).

Without further ado, Parzival, “the man of the Gral Inscription,” is proclaimed king and sovereign. He then rides out with some of the Grail-company to visit the hermit, Trevrinent, who praises God’s providence and power in allowing Parzival to attain the Grail. Parzival’s thoughts then turn to the woman he has not seen for five years. He has heard that Condwiramurs is being escorted toward the Grail castle for their long-postponed reunion; Parzival had parted from her in Book Four. He rides off into the night toward a joyous reunion with his wife, and the two sons whom he has never seen.

The entire party then returns to Munsalvæsche, where Feirefiz is waiting for them. Soon solemn preparations are made for the Gral. It is in the following long account, rather than in the healing of Anfortas, that one finds the culmination of Wolfram’s Grail romance. Here Wolfram tells how Parzival’s infidel half-brother is brought to the Grail by the love for a woman and by the sacrament of Christian baptism:

If I were to tell you how they began to serve them . . . the tale would grow too lengthy. Thus for brevity’s sake I shall move fast.

With ceremony they received from the Gral meats both wild and tame: for this man mead, for another wine, each according to his custom. . . .

The Infidel inquired how the empty cups of gold became full at the Table—a marvel he delighted to watch!

“My Lord,” replied handsome Anfortas, who was seated next to him, “do you not see the Gral straight in front of you?”

“I see nothing but an achmardi” [a green cloth], replied the particolored Infidel. My young lady [Repanse de Schoye] carried it in to us, the one standing there before us, wearing a crown. Her glance goes right to my heart. I imagined myself so strong that no woman, wed or unwed, could rob me of my happiness. . . . Am I to go on living in such torment? O mighty god Jupiter, why didst thou have to send me here to endure such hardships?”

Love’s power and joy’s weakness made him blench where he was white. . . . His first love died away, and he wished to forget it.

... A maiden was inflicting such pangs on him that this son of Gahmuret of Zazamanc thought little of the love of Clauditte, Olimpia, Secundille and other women elsewhere, far and wide, who had rewarded him for his service and sounded his praises.

From the pallor of Feirefiz's white patches, handsome Anfortas saw that his companion was in torment and that his spirit had abandoned him.

"I am very sorry, sir," he said, "if my sister is causing such pain. No man has suffered for her sake before." ...

"If as you say the girl wearing the crown over her flowing hair is your sister, then advise me how to win her love," replied Feirefiz Angevin. "All my heart's desire is for her." ...

"My lord," said Anfortas to Parzival, "I believe your brother has not yet seen the Gral." And Feirefiz himself told his host that he did not see it, which struck all the knights there as mysterious. Word of this also reached the aged, bedridden Titurel.

"He is a heathen man," he said, "and should not hope, without the benefit of Baptism, to have his eyes opened, and to share with the others in contemplating the Gral. A fence has been raised around it."—This message was sent to the hall.

On the next day Feirefiz is catechized and agrees to accept baptism: "They then treated him according to the Christian rite and pronounced the baptismal blessing over him. As soon as the Infidel had been baptized and the baptismal robing was over, they brought to him the maiden [Repanse de Schoye]. As to seeing the Gral, until the holy water [of baptism] covered him he had been blind: but afterwards the Gral was unveiled to his vision" (16, 898, 12–818, 23; pp. 400–406).

The opening of Feirefiz's eyes to the Grail through baptism, and his marriage to Repanse de Schoye, the Grail-bearer, is the climax of Book Sixteen. In the final stanzas Wolfram cheekily associates his tale with a number of other popular stories known to his audience. For example, he explains what must have been the already legendary reticence of the Templars to talk about themselves as a consequence of their Grail guardianship: "Because gentle Anfortas had remained in bitter agony so long and the Question was withheld from him for such a time, the members of the Gral Company are now forever

averse to questioning, they do not wish to be asked about themselves" (16, 818, 24–819, 8; p. 406).

Wolfram further reveals that Prester John, a legendary Christian king of Asia in whom the twelfth- and thirteenth-century crusaders hoped to find an ally overseas, is in fact the son who is born to Feirefiz and Repanse de Schoye in "India" [modern-day Ethiopia]. Wolfram also cleverly assimilates Loherangrin, the son of Parzival and Condwiramurs, to the legendary swan-king, Lohengrin. He then concludes his poem:

If Master Chrestien de Troyes has not done full justice to this story, Kyot, who sent us the authentic tale, has good cause to be vexed. The Provençal tells the whole: how the son of Herzeloide achieved the Gral as had been ordained for him after Anfortas had forfeited it. The authentic tale with the conclusion to the romance has been sent to the German lands for us from Provence.

I, Wolfram von Eschenbach, intend to speak no more of it than what the Master uttered over there.

I have named Parzival's sons and his high lineage correctly, and have brought him to the goal which a happy dispensation intended for him, despite his setbacks.

A life so concluded that God is not robbed of the soul through fault of the body, and which can obtain the world's favor with dignity, that is a worthy work.

If I have any well-wishers among good women of discernment I shall be valued the more for my having told this tale to its end. And if it was done to please one in particular, she will have to speak sweet words to me. (16, 827, 1–30; pp. 410–411)

Wolfram's *Parzival* became tremendously popular. It survives in some seventy medieval manuscript copies, the largest number for any work of medieval German literature,¹³ and it remains today one of the best-known and most influential tellings of the story of Parzival and of the Grail. No one who would set out to tell the story after Wolfram's time could afford to be entirely ignorant of his rich and colorful version. But Wolfram's story was far from the last word on

the subject of the Grail. Many of his answers to questions raised by Chrétien's enigmatic *conte* were unsatisfying to his contemporaries. Few writers, for example, followed Wolfram in imagining the Grail as a mystical stone. Nor did he provide an adequate account of the origins of the Grail. His brief assertion that it was brought to earth by an angelic host, and reinvigorated each year by a dove bearing a eucharistic wafer, never quite won conviction among poets and storytellers. A fuller and more persuasive account of the nature and the origins of the Grail was needed, and it is this that Robert de Boron set out to provide in his poem *Joseph d'Arimathie*, or "The Great History of the Grail."

CHAPTER 3

Robert de Boron

Joseph d'Arimathie

(La grant estoire dou graal)

At about the same time as Wolfram von Eschenbach was composing his elaborate version of the *Perceval* story, Robert de Boron was embarking on an even more challenging task, that of writing a “history” of the Grail. He called his work “The Great History of the Grail” (*La grant estoire dou graal*), although modern scholars have preferred to call it after its main character, Joseph of Arimathea.¹ Robert claims to be the first person ever to tell the history of the Grail: “I am convinced that no one could [tell the whole story of the Grail] if he had not first heard the great *History of the Grail* correctly told, . . . At the time when I told it peaceably to my lord Walter of Montbéliard, the great *History of the Grail* had never been told by mortal man” (ll. 3484–3494; p. 59).²

Robert’s claim to be the first person to tell the history of the Grail deserves attention.³ He is not, I think, claiming priority over Chrétien de Troyes and others who have already told stories about the Grail. Rather he claims to be the first person to provide a full and remarkable (if fictional) history of that vessel. In this he is surely correct. No one before him had imagined that the origins of the Grail should be sought in first-century Palestine, in the time of Jesus. His story is the first to associate the Grail with the passion and

crucifixion of Christ, and with Joseph of Arimathea, the nobleman who helped to lay Christ in the tomb. He is the first to suggest that the Grail should call to mind the cup of the Last Supper and the chalice of the Catholic mass. His “history” would henceforth become so inseparable from the story of the Grail that it is easy to forget that, before Robert, no one had told such a story or imagined such an explanation for the importance of the Grail. His is one of the great poetic inventions of history.

Robert was a native of Boron, a village in medieval Burgundy, in the future Franche-Comté, near Belfort, and not far from the Swiss city of Basel.⁴ Some fifteen kilometers to the west of Boron is the town and castle of Robert’s patron, Walter of Montbéliard. Of Walter we know quite a bit. He was lord of Montfaucon and count of Montbéliard, and had ties with several important families in the Champagne region, including the houses of Joinville and of Brienne.⁵ We know that Walter set out in 1201 for Italy, took part in the Fourth Crusade, and died in the Holy Land in 1212. Robert informs us that he had told the story of the Grail’s history “peaceably” to his lord Walter. This may mean that he recited a version of the story to Walter before Walter left on Crusade in 1202, and then committed to writing the version we have sometime after. If so, we can date the poem’s inception from before 1202. Since he refers to Walter as his lord, we can be confident that the work was completed before Walter’s death in 1212.⁶

Robert’s history of the Grail, as we have it, exists in two versions, a poem of 3,502 lines and a prose translation. The poem survives in a single manuscript copy and is accompanied by the first 504 lines of a sequel, carrying the story of the Grail forward to the time of Merlin and King Arthur. This sequel is almost certainly also by Robert. The lasting influence of Robert’s story, however, was by way of the prose translation of his poem, perhaps made by Robert himself, that survives in seventeen manuscripts.⁷ During the ensuing decades this prose version would serve as the basis for the most widely read story

of the Grail in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the “Vulgate” *Estoire del saint Graal* (ca. 1230).⁸

Robert’s story begins not with Perceval in a forest, but with events in the Holy Land, a thousand years earlier, during the last days of Jesus’ earthly life. Like all medieval writers, Robert included among his sources for these events not only the biblical accounts of the four Evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), but also a rich literature of popular and apocryphal writings which filled out the spare outlines of the canonical Gospels. The Bible, in the Middle Ages, was never thought to contain the whole of sacred history, but only the parts that were essential to salvation. Numerous additional stories, some thought to be more trustworthy than others, circulated from a very early date in Christian history. Among these, one of the most popular works and most respected among orthodox Christians was the so-called *Gospel of Nicodemus*, written probably in the fifth or sixth century but based on earlier traditions.⁹ It was especially this text ascribed to “Nicodemus,” along with the spare account of the biblical writers, that served as the basis for Robert de Boron’s story of Joseph of Arimathea and the Grail.

Nicodemus plays a small but important role in the canonical Gospels. He is described as a Pharisee, and one of the rulers of the Jews (John 3:1; cf. John 7:50). He is also said to have been present at the crucifixion of Jesus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy man who was also a respected member of the Jewish council. The Gospel of John sketches the basic history of Joseph’s and Nicodemus’s actions after the crucifixion:

After this, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body. Nicodemus also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds’ weight. They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloth with the spices, as is the burial

custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:38–42; cf. Matthew 27:57–61; Mark 15:42–47; Luke 23:50–56)

The stories of Nicodemus and of Joseph of Arimathea were greatly elaborated by later writers, and especially by the author of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, before they were transformed by Robert de Boron, early in the thirteenth century, into his “Romance of the History of the Grail.”¹⁰ One can say, without much oversimplification, that Robert simply adopted the plot of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, and then inserted the Holy Grail into this story wherever appropriate. The resulting history—that the Grail was a vessel used by Christ at the Last Supper, that it was given to Joseph of Arimathea, who used it to collect Christ’s blood at the burial, and that it was henceforth in Joseph’s care—quickly became the standard account of the “origins” of the Grail, its nature, and its significance.

Robert is an excellent raconteur, and his account of the events surrounding Christ’s crucifixion is full of memorable stories. He explains, for example, in a way that would make sense to his medieval audience, the reason that Judas received thirty pieces of silver for betraying Jesus:

Jesus had few disciples, and one of these was false; no need forced him to be so wicked, but he was because he wanted to be, of his own choice. . . . Judas, whom God [i.e., Jesus] loved dearly, had an income which was known as a tithe, and with it he acted as the seneschal among Jesus’ disciples, taking care of the domestic expenses. In this office he grew greedy, so that he was not as kindly to the disciples as they were among themselves, loving one another. He began to stand apart, and sometimes to linger behind them. He was more cruel than he used to be, so that everyone was afraid of him. Our Lord knew all about this, for nothing can be hidden from him.

In those days it was the custom that whatever was given to a

lord, his chamberlain took one tenth of it as his own. Now it happened on the day of the Last Supper that Mary Magdalene came straight into Simon's house, and found Jesus sitting at table with his disciples, and Judas eating with Jesus. She hid under the table, and knelt at Jesus' feet; she began to weep bitterly, washing the feet of Our Lord with her tears, and wiped them with her beautiful hair. Next she anointed them with a fine and costly ointment that she had brought, and Jesus' head likewise. She so filled the house with the scent and the wonderful perfume of the ointment, that everyone was amazed. But Judas was furious; the ointment was worth three hundred deniers, or more. He had not been given his payment from it, his tithe of thirty deniers which was his due. He began to consider how he might make good this loss. (ll. 209–260; pp. 4–5)¹¹

Robert continues to recount the events of the Last Supper, placing all the action in the house of Simon (the leper). He tells how Jesus washed the disciples' feet, and he provides an extended explanation by Jesus of the meaning of this action. He then tells how Judas summoned the Jews to Simon's house and identified Jesus to them with a kiss, and how Jesus was taken prisoner. Robert then adds a detail not found in any of his sources: "There was in that place a very noble vessel (*veissel mout gent*) in which Christ performed his sacrament (*Ou Criz feisoit son sacrement*); a Jew found that vessel in Simon's house, and picked it up and kept it, for Jesus was taken away from there and handed over to Pilate" (ll. 395–400; p. 7).

The "sacrament" to which Robert refers is almost certainly the institution of the Eucharist, the sacrament of Christ's body and blood.¹² The Gospel accounts in Matthew, Mark, and Luke all describe this event.¹³ It was, and still is, reenacted each day in the liturgy of the Catholic mass; the form of words has changed little over the centuries: "Who [Jesus] the day before He suffered took bread into His holy and venerable hands . . . blessed, broke and gave it to His disciples, saying: Take and eat you all of this, for this is my body. In like manner . . . taking also this glorious chalice [*praeclarus*

calix] into His holy and venerable hands. . . . He blessed and gave it to His disciples, saying: Take and drink you all of this, for this is the chalice [*calix*] of my blood, of the new and eternal testament: the mystery of faith: which shall be shed for you and for many unto the remission of sins.”¹⁴

The “very noble vessel” of Robert’s poem would seem to echo the *praeclarum calicem* of the mass, and thus to call to mind the original vessel in which Christ established the “new testament of his blood.” For reasons that will become clear, however, Robert always refers to it by the generic term “vessel,” rather than calling it specifically a cup or chalice.

Robert, following his sources, next describes how Jesus was led before Pilate, the Roman governor in Jerusalem. Pilate reluctantly condemns Jesus to death on the cross, and Robert adds a significant detail: “The Jew carrying the vessel which he had taken from the house of Simon came to Pilate and gave it to him; and Pilate put it in a safe place until he was informed that Jesus had been executed” (ll. 433–438; p. 8).

At this point Joseph of Arimathea enters the picture in the Gospel and in the apocryphal accounts, and asks Pilate for the body of Jesus.¹⁵ Robert retells the story in his inimitable way: “When Joseph heard the news [of Jesus’ execution], his anger and grief were immense. He hurried to Pilate and said: ‘I have served you for a long time, together with my five horsemen, and have never received any payment. But I shall never accept any reward for it, unless you will give me a gift, as you have always promised me. Give it to me, for it is within your power’” (ll. 439–448; p. 8).

Pilate agrees to give Joseph whatever he should ask, and Joseph requests the body of Jesus, “‘who was wrongfully hung on the cross.’ . . . Pilate was amazed when he asked for so small a gift, and said: ‘I expected and secretly believed that you would want something of more value, and, certainly, I would have granted it to you. Since you

ask for his body, you shall have it, as payment of your wages' " (ll. 457–464; p. 8).

Joseph hurries to the place of crucifixion, but the guards refuse to allow him to take the body down from the cross. He returns to Pilate, who is furious that his order has been ignored: "When Pilate heard this he was displeased, indeed, he was furiously angry. He caught sight of a man, among those in attendance, whose name was Nicodemus. 'Go there at once,' he told him, 'with Joseph of Arimathea. Free Jesus from the place of his suffering where those scoundrels put him, and let him be placed entirely in Joseph's keeping'" (ll. 498–506; p. 9).

Here Robert departs again from his sources, by inserting another reference to the mysterious vessel: "Then Pilate took the vessel. When he remembered it, he was glad; he called Joseph and gave it to him saying: 'You loved this man very much.' Joseph replied: 'I did indeed.' He left that place at once and went straight to the cross, taking Nicodemus with him. Pilate had given him the vessel for this reason: he did not wish to keep for himself anything which had belonged to Jesus and which might be grounds for accusing him" (ll. 507–516; p. 9).

Joseph and Nicodemus then return with tools to the place of the crucifixion. They climb up and take Jesus down from the cross. Joseph takes the body and prepares it for burial. As he is washing the wounds, bright blood flows out. This reminds Joseph of the blood that flowed from Jesus' side on the cross (when the centurion pierced him with a lance) and split a stone that it struck at the foot of the cross. Robert adds to his sources that Joseph, thus alerted to the importance of Jesus' blood, "ran to fetch his vessel, and set it where the blood flowed. He believed that any drops of blood which fell into it would be better there than in any other place he could find for them, however long he looked. Using his vessel, he wiped and carefully cleaned the wounds, those in the hands and in the side, and

those in the feet, all around and about. Now all the blood was collected, and brought together in the vessel. Joseph wrapped the body in a shroud which he had bought especially, and placed it within a rock which he had chosen for his own use, and covered it with a stone of a kind which we in this country call *tombe*" (ll. 563–580; p. 10).

Jesus' body subsequently disappears from the tomb during the Jewish Sabbath. Robert, following his sources, tells how Jesus descended to hell and brought out from there Adam, Eve, and all of their virtuous descendants. Then, early on Sunday morning: "When Our Lord had done his will in this matter, as much as was proper, he rose again, though the Jews never knew it, and could not see it. He appeared—and this is beyond all doubt—to Mary Magdalene, to his apostles, to his own people who saw him clearly. After this, word spread throughout the whole country that Jesus, the son of Mary, had risen from the dead and lived again. His disciples all saw him and recognized him without difficulty" (ll. 603–616; p. 11).

When the Jews hear this, they come together in the synagogue and consult. They decide to seize Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, the last persons to have seen Jesus, and hold them hostage for the missing body, should anyone seek it. Nicodemus has a friend at the council who warns him of this plan and he escapes. But they find Joseph at his house, accuse him of stealing the body, and throw him into a deep dungeon in the house of a powerful man. Robert continues, with material entirely of his own invention:

Joseph was entirely hidden away from the world, and wretchedly lodged; but God, who is a friend in need, did not forget him, for what Joseph suffered for his sake was most generously rewarded. God [Jesus] appeared to him in prison, bearing with him his vessel, which cast such great radiance over him that it lit up the dungeon. When Joseph saw this radiance, his heart was filled with joy. God brought with him his vessel in which his blood had been collected. When Joseph saw the vessel, he was

filled with the grace of the Holy Spirit, and asked: “Almighty Lord God, what is the source of this immense radiance? I believe so firmly in you and your name that it can come from no other source but yourself.” (ll. 711–730; pp. 12–13)

Jesus then unfolds for Joseph the articles of the Christian faith, and begins to reveal to him mysteries of the Grail:

“Joseph, now you have heard the certain truth about how the Son of God came to earth. You have also heard why he was born of the Virgin, so that he might die on the cross, and the Father might regain his creation. For this reason I came to earth, and shed the blood of my body, which flowed from it at five points; I suffered greatly there.” . . . “You shall have in your power the proof of my death, and shall keep it, and whoever you choose to give it to shall have it in his keeping.”

Our Lord brought out the noble and precious vessel, containing that holiest of blood which Joseph had collected when he took the body down from the cross and washed its wounds. . . . Joseph . . . fell to his knees, and thanked Our Lord: “Lord God, am I then worthy to be the keeper of the priceless vessel into which I allowed your holy blood to flow?” God replied: “You shall keep it for me—you and those to whom you entrust it.” (ll. 769–870; pp. 13–15)

Jesus then gives the vessel to Joseph, and reveals to him the mysteries of the sacrament of the Eucharist, and as well as the particular honor that would come to Joseph for his role in collecting Jesus’ blood into the sacred vessel of the Last Supper:

Joseph, who was on his knees, took the vessel which God was holding. “Joseph,” said God, “sinners shall find here salvation for their pains. Those who truly believe in me shall find repentance for their wrongs. . . . Know that whenever the sacrament is performed, it will contain a remembrance of you. Whoever knows how to look will see all this.” “In faith,” said Joseph, “I did not know this, tell me, and then I will know it.”

“Joseph, you know that I and all my companions were eating in Simon’s house at the Last Supper, on the Thursday. I blessed the bread and the wine of that meal, and told the company that

they were eating my flesh in the bread, and in the wine they were drinking my blood; and so this table [of the Last Supper] will be represented in many lands. You took me down from the cross and laid me in the tomb; this is represented by the altar on which I will be placed by those who sacrifice me. The cloth in which I was wrapped will be called ‘corporal.’ This vessel, in which you put my blood when you collected it from my body, will be called ‘chalice.’ The paten covering it shall stand for the stone which was sealed above me when you had me placed in the tomb. You should know that all these things are signs that will bring you to mind. All those who see your vessel shall be members of my company. Their hearts shall be filled to overflowing, and their joy shall be eternal.” (ll. 879–920; pp. 15–16)¹⁶

This interpretation of the liturgy of the mass that associated the altar, corporal-cloth, chalice, and paten with the deeds of Joseph of Arimathea has a long history of its own.¹⁷ Robert’s innovation was simply to introduce Joseph’s “vessel” into the story. In the traditional interpretation, probably taken by Robert from a very popular work of religious instruction, the *Gemma animae* of Honorius Augustodunensis, written in the first half of the twelfth century,¹⁸ the deacon assisting the priest brings the chalice, places it on the altar, and covers it with the corporal-cloth. In doing so, Honorius says: “He is representing Joseph of Arimathea, who took the body of Christ down [from the cross], covered his face with a cloth, placed him in a tomb, and covered it with a stone. . . . The chalice, when it is covered by the corporal-cloth, which signifies the clean shroud in which Joseph wrapped the body of Christ, this chalice is the tomb; the paten represents the stone which covered the tomb.”¹⁹

This allegorical interpretation of the deacon’s actions at the mass was known already in Europe in the ninth century and may have derived from even earlier Byzantine sources.²⁰ It was Robert de Boron’s bold invention to bring this old allegory into contact with the new story of the Grail. Robert does this by adding to the traditional accounts of Joseph’s life the detail that he had come into

possession of the actual “vessel” that Jesus used at the Last Supper and in which Joseph had later collected blood from Jesus’ body after the crucifixion. It is this vessel or Grail, rather than the rock-cut tomb of the Gospel account and of Honorius’s allegorical interpretation, that Robert associates with the chalice of the mass. But Robert does not simply identify Joseph’s Grail with a eucharistic chalice. Rather, he depicts Jesus as saying that Joseph’s vessel, whatever its original size or shape, will henceforth be called to mind whenever the mass is celebrated: “This vessel, in which you put my blood when you collected it from my body, will be called ‘chalice’” (ll. 907–909; p. 16). By declining to say that Joseph’s vessel is a chalice, but only saying that it will be called ‘chalice,’ Robert is able to reconcile his story with Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal*, where the Grail is clearly not a eucharistic chalice, but a serving dish or platter. Robert thus brings together in a plausible fashion the mysterious and very popular romance of the Grail with the Christian mystery of Christ’s body and blood. The “vessel” will henceforth have its own history—the history of the Grail—as a very special relic of the Christ’s earthly life, and as the object of desire in popular song and story. Robert is aware of the audacity of his achievement. He goes on immediately to say: “I dare not tell or recount this, nor would I be able to do so even if I wished to, if I did not have the great book in which are recorded the histories made and written down by the most learned men. In that book, the great secrets are written which are named and called the Grail” (ll. 929–936; p. 16).

Here Robert, like Chrétien and Wolfram von Eschenbach, has recourse to an authoritative source for his story. Scholars have argued that the “Grant Livre” is a treatise such as Honorius Augustodunensis’s *Gemma animae*, which includes a brief discussion of the symbolism of the mass, or perhaps a collection of hermetic “secrets.”²¹ But neither Honorius’s treatise nor any other extant writings from before Robert’s day corresponds to Robert’s description of

a “great book in which are recorded the histories made and written down by the most learned men,” concerning either Joseph’s vessel or the “secrets of the Grail.” As is the case with both Chrétien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach, no trace of such a book, or of such histories, has ever been found despite centuries of research.²² In this case, too, it would seem that Robert is invoking an invented authority to stand behind, and to substantiate, his innovative account of the Grail’s history.

The next 1,400 lines of Robert’s poem describe the events leading up to the discovery and liberation of Joseph of Arimathea from the prison in which he has been confined for some forty years. Much of the narrative material of this section is derived from two early Christian apocryphal works, the *Vengeance of the Saviour* (*Vindicta Salvatoris*) and the *Healing of Tiberius* (*Cura sanitatis Tiberii*).²³ Joseph remains in confinement until Vespasian comes to Jerusalem and frees him. The historical Vespasian was the Roman emperor who was sent to Judea in A.D. 67 to put down a Jewish revolt and who destroyed the temple in Jerusalem in A.D. 70. In Robert’s story, Vespasian is cured of leprosy by means of another relic of Christ’s time on earth, the cloth or veil of Veronica, on which an image of Christ’s face was imprinted when she wiped his face with it on the road to Calvary and the crucifixion. Robert tells how Veronica and her veil are taken back to Rome, where the emperor’s son is healed (ll. 1575–1710; pp. 27–29).²⁴

From this point on, Robert follows no known sources for his story. He tells how Vespasian, in joy over his healing, goes to Jerusalem and seeks out any other objects that belonged to Jesus. He hears of Joseph of Arimathea, is led to his dungeon, and finds him still alive, preserved by his sacred vessel, after all these years. Joseph converts Vespasian to Christianity and is freed from his prison. He is reunited with his sister, Enygeus, and her husband, Hebron (shortened to “Bron” in the rest of the story), and converts them to Chris-

tianity. They and many of their friends decide to follow Joseph wherever he should lead them. Joseph tells them: “‘If you will believe me, you will not stay here. Instead you will abandon your inheritance, your lands and your dwellings, and we shall go into exile. We will do all this for the love of God’” (ll. 2345–2351; p. 39).

Accompanied by his followers, Joseph travels into distant lands (*lointaines terres*), where they remain for a long time. During this exile, Joseph learns much from God about his “vessel,” and teaches this to his companions. Those who are able to see the vessel, and to remain in its presence, feel an indescribable pleasure: “‘No heart can conceive, none could imagine the ecstasy we experience, how we are immersed in great joy so that we are obliged to stay in the same place and to remain there until the morning’” (ll. 2609–2614; p. 44).

They ask “Petrus,” an enigmatic character seeming to represent St. Peter and the Church, who has appeared in the story without introduction: “‘Where could such great grace come from, which so fills the hearts of men and women, and entirely renews the soul?’ This is how Petrus answered them: ‘It comes from the blessed Jesus, who protected Joseph in the prison where he was unjustly confined’” (ll. 2615–2622; p. 44).

Those who are unable to see the vessel or to feel joy in its presence recognize that by it they are separated from the Grail-community: “‘It is by that vessel that we are set apart from you, for, as you can clearly see, it does not love sinners and will not tolerate their presence. . . . We shall go away like the wretches we are, and we shall leave you. But first please advise us what we shall reply when we are asked why we have left you here’” (ll. 2623–2626; p. 44).

Petrus answers for the community:

“Now listen to what you must reply when challenged in that way, and your reply will be the truth: that we have remained in the grace of God our Father, of Jesus Christ and of the Holy Spirit, strengthened in Joseph’s belief and in what he foresaw.”

“And what shall be the fame of the vessel which you find so agreeable? [a play on the words *graal* and *agree*] Tell us, what do people call it when they speak its name?”

Petrus answered: “I have no desire to conceal that: those who desire to call it rightly, will rightly call it the Grail. For I believe, whoever sees the Grail will find it agreeable. It charms all those in this land, they find it pleasant and agreeable; those who are able to remain with it and can bear its presence, when they see it they feel delight, they are as happy as a fish when a man holds it in his hand, and it can escape from his hand and return to swimming unconfined in the water.”

When the others heard this, they agreed heartily. They would agree to no other name, but that it should be called the Grail; and it is right that people should agree in this way. Both those who departed and those who remained called the vessel the Grail, for the reason I have told you. (ll. 2627–2678; pp. 44–45)

Robert closes the scene by telling us: “The community who remained there established the hour of terce [i.e., the liturgical hour at which mass was normally sung in churches]; for they said that when they went to this Grail, they would call this its service. And because all this is true, we call it *The History of the Grail*, and it was to have the name of Grail from that time to this” (ll. 2679–2686; p. 45).

Among the people who could not see the vessel and were thus excluded from its company was one “Moses,” who is probably to be understood as an image of the “Synagogue” and of the Jews. Robert explains that “he could not believe or imagine that [the Grail-company] could receive grace in such abundance” as they did, and that “his name will not be mentioned again, in song or story, until the return of the man who is to fill the empty place [at the table of the Grail]; that man must find him; but it is not right to say any more about him” (ll. 2797–2821; pp. 48–49).

The last 1,350 lines of the poem describe the dispersal of the Grail-company and the passage westward of the Grail. The young people (the children of Bron and Enygeus and their families) depart

under the leadership of Alan, Bron's son, for foreign lands [*en estranges terres*]. They will be reunited with the Grail only at a later time. In preparation for their journey, Jesus tells Joseph to show the Grail to Alan and to instruct him: “‘When you have revealed all this to him, bring my vessel to him, and tell him what it contains; that is, the blood which flowed from my body. If he really believes this sincerely, his faith will be strengthened’” (ll. 3055–3060; p. 53).

Wherever they went, Alan and his company “proclaimed the death of Jesus Christ to the men and women that they met.” From this company is to come an heir to the Grail, one of Alan’s children (identified as Perceval in a later prose redaction of the poem),²⁵ who will be an interpreter of its mysteries, and the one who will tell what has become of Moses (ll. 2971–3190; pp. 51–55).

“Petrus” is also to set off “in whatever direction he pleases, wherever his heart leads him, and not to be afraid.” A divine voice tells Joseph: “Let no one doubt that [Petrus] will go to the vale of Avalon [*vau d’Avaron*] and dwell in that land.²⁶ For that land, in certain truth, lies towards the West. Tell him that he will wait where he settles for the son of Alan . . . [who] will teach him the power of which this vessel is capable, and tell him what has become of Moses who was lost’” (ll. 3107–3136; pp. 53–54).

Finally, Bron is to leave with his wife, Enyeus, and the rest of the Grail-company, taking with him Joseph’s vessel. The divine voice explains to Joseph that he is to relinquish his precious vessel to Bron: “‘Joseph, it is truly necessary that all things which have their beginning must also have their end. Our Lord knows for a certainty that Bron has been a very worthy man . . . it is God’s will, and he wishes it to be so, that he should have your vessel and keep it after you’” (ll. 3307–3318; pp. 56–57).

Robert then ties his *History of the Grail* neatly into Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal* by revealing Bron’s identity. According to Robert, Bron is the Rich Fisherman, whom the knowledgeable reader will

recognize immediately as the rich Fisher King of Chrétien's story, in whose castle Perceval will find the Grail: "When you have [instructed Bron] thoroughly, hand the vessel over to him for him to keep from now onwards. . . . And anyone who wants to name him, will always call him by his rightful name, the Rich Fisherman. His reputation will be ever-increasing, because of the fish which he caught when this grace first began" (ll. 3343–3345; p. 57).

As the Grail passes into Bron's hands, it begins its journey to the West: "Just as the world progresses, diminishing every day, so must all these people move towards the West. As soon as [Bron] has taken possession of your vessel, and it is his, he must set off at once towards the West, wherever he chooses, to the place where his heart most leads him. . . . When you give the vessel to Bron, and hand over to him the grace and everything . . . and these actions are completed in every detail, then Petrus will depart. . . . For then he will be able to say truly that he has seen Hebron, the Rich Fisherman, take possession of the vessel and the honour that accompanies it" (ll. 3351–3388; pp. 57–58).

Bron departs with the Grail, leaving Joseph behind to live out his days in his native land.²⁷ Robert thus concludes his story of Joseph of Arimathea, the first keeper of the Grail. He then informs his readers of what else we need to know if we would like the full history of the Grail:

Master Robert de Boron says that if we wish to know this [story], he will surely need to be able to tell you where Alan, the son of Hebron, went, and what became of him. . . . and the way of life which Petrus led, what became of him and what place he went to, in what place he will be regained, when he could scarcely be found; what became of Moses, who was lost for so long—for he must rightly be found, so the word said; where the Rich Fisherman went, and where he will settle, so that he might be able to bring back the one who must now depart.

It is necessary to bring together every one of these four

things and to arrange each part individually as it should be; but I am convinced that no one could bring them together if he had not first heard the great *History of the Grail* correctly told, for it is quite true. At the time when I told it peaceably to my lord Walter of Montbéliard, the great *History of the Grail* had never been told by any mortal. But I declare to all those who wish to own this book that, if God allows me to live in good health, it is certainly my intention to bring together these parts, if I can find them in any book. (ll. 3461–3500; p. 59)

It seems that Robert was never able to complete these four parts of his *History of the Grail*. He turns instead to a fifth part, the story of Merlin, and advises his audience that he is probably the only one who can tell those other stories correctly: “Just as I leave one part, which I will not recount, so must I narrate the fifth, and set aside the four, until I can return to my narrative with greater leisure, and return in my own way to this work, and set out each part separately. But as for the four about whom I say nothing, there is no one so wise that he knows what has become of them; everyone will think that they are lost, not knowing the significance of my parting from them” (ll. 3501–3514; pp. 59–60).

With this beguiling hint of further stories, Robert takes leave of his *History of the Grail*. He is, he tells us, the first person to narrate this story of the Grail’s origins and history. In Germany, Wolfram von Eschenbach had elaborated Chrétien’s story of Perceval and explained the enigmatic *graal* as a precious stone, brought to earth by angels. Robert de Boron’s undertaking was more ambitious; he set out to tell the whole prehistory of Chrétien’s *graal*—its sacred origins, its associations with the christianization of the world, and its travels toward the West and King Arthur’s realm. His *History* entered almost immediately into the mainstream of Grail legends. It would be retold, refashioned, elaborated, and amended in its details by many authors, but the notion that the Grail was a real object, a

most precious relic of Christ and of the Christian church, would henceforth be in the mind of everyone who heard and talked about the Grail. By inventing for it a plausible and meaningful story of origins, Robert helped to move the Grail from the world of romance into the realm of history.

CHAPTER 4

Hélinand of Froidmont

All of the stories and accounts of the Grail that have come down to us have been shaped, to one degree or another, by the romantic fictions of the three great poets discussed above. Chrétien de Troyes first made the enigmatic *graal* into the centerpiece of a romance. He may have heard about the Grail in other stories, now lost, but it is his *conte* that first introduces the matter of the Holy Grail into the mainstream of European literature. Chrétien seems to have had only a very vague notion of just what a *graal* might be, where it might have come from, or why it should be so important. But the story he told was, as he said, “the finest tale that can be told at royal court,” and it inspired other poets to take up the challenge of elaborating, improving upon, and completing his spare account of this “most holy thing,” the Grail. Wolfram von Eschenbach preserved the essential elements of Chrétien’s story, while adding myriad details. He imagined Chrétien’s *graal* to be a sacred stone, brought from heaven by angels, and able to work wonders among those chosen by God to serve it. Robert de Boron also took Chrétien’s story as his fixed point of reference and provided for the Grail a prehistory in which it was associated, for the first time, with the “vessel” used by Jesus at the Last Supper and preserved for later generations by Joseph of Arimathea. No one before Robert had made this connection between the

Grail and the cup of Christ's Last Supper and crucifixion. Like Chrétien's and Wolfram's accounts, Robert's story of the sacred vessel is not a product of historical research but an inspired creation of the poetic imagination.

A modern history of the Holy Grail, then, must begin with these three poets and with their literary creations. They are the ones, as far as we can tell, who invented the Grail legends and who brought the Grail to the attention of an eager and ever-expanding audience. But historical questions remain: Was there not a real thing, a Grail, at the root of their stories? Are there not earlier sources and materials that served as the basis for the stories that the poets told? As to the first question, the poets give us no reason to think that their stories concerned a real, historical object called a Grail. Theirs are romantic fictions, and very good ones. Like modern stories of starships, or hobbits, or sorcerers' boarding schools, they were not meant to be taken simply as historical fact. They inspired readers and listeners to enter into the world of romance, and there to learn many things about themselves and about the real world around them. But the poets did not, it would seem, expect anyone to confuse the one world with the other. Nowhere do they imply that they themselves, for example, have ever seen the Grail, or that they expect to. The closest they come to this is when Robert de Boron suggests that future generations (meaning his readers and listeners) will recall the Grail and its mysteries when they go to mass and when they remember Christ's passion. To say that the Grail is the product of poetic fancy rather than of historical research is not to belittle the Grail stories, but rather to place them properly in the dignified and god-like realm of the human imagination.

With regard to the second question, however, we are encouraged by the authors themselves to imagine that there are historical sources lying behind their poetic creations. Chrétien tells us that his story is a verse translation of a book given to him by his patron, Count Philip

of Flanders. Wolfram claims to be translating into German a Provençal story written by the “famous master Kyot,” who found the materials for his story in a neglected manuscript in Toledo and in an Angevin chronicle. Robert de Boron, who takes credit for being the first to tell the history of the Grail, also claims to have found the secrets of the Grail in “a great book of histories, made and written down by the most learned men.” I have suggested above that there is no need to take these assertions as anything more than literary embellishments of the poet’s work. As such they are quite effective, as is shown by the continuing fascination that these allusions to authoritative sources continue to exercise on modern readers. Except possibly in Chrétien’s case (see Chapter 8), there is no historical or literary evidence to substantiate their claims, or to suggest that the authorities and books they invoke ever really existed. We can say this with some confidence, not only because the best research of modern scholars in the manuscript repositories around the world has found no trace of such books as are mentioned by the poets, but also because at least one knowledgeable and well-connected historian who was a contemporary of these authors made a diligent but unsuccessful search at the time.

This historian, Hélinand of Froidmont, was born in northern France about 1160. As a youth, he studied at Beauvais and became a famous troubadour, much appreciated at the court of King Philip Augustus of France.¹ Sometime around 1182 he renounced the world and joined the Cistercian monastery of Froidmont in the region of Beauvais. He later became prior of Froidmont, and died sometime after 1229. One of his most important writings was a universal history (*Chronicon*) from the creation of the world down to Hélinand’s own time. The first eighteen books survive in two manuscript copies and cover the history of the world from the creation to the time of Alexander the Great. Books 19 to 44 have been lost. Books 45 to 49, covering the years 634 to 1204, survive only in a printed edition made

in 1669; the manuscript from which the text was printed has been lost or destroyed.² The *Chronicon* was probably composed sometime between 1211 and 1223, but additions may have been made up until the time of Hélinand's death.³

The surviving portions of the *Chronicon* reveal Hélinand as a thoughtful and conscientious historian. He draws his evidence from a large number of earlier histories, as well as from the evidence of saints' lives and collections of miracles and exemplary stories. He regularly cites his sources and discusses them, noting problems of chronology and of fact (*historica veritas*), and commenting judiciously on the issues involved.⁴ One example of his technique is well known to scholars because it contains the earliest surviving reference to the Grail in historical literature. I quote the full entry here because, although it is well known, it is seldom discussed in its entirety. It occurs in Book 45 of the *Chronicon*, under the year 718:

At the same time [ca. 718], in Britain, a marvelous vision was shown to a hermit by an angel, concerning Saint Joseph [of Arimathea] the Decurion who took the Lord's body down from the cross, and concerning that serving bowl [*catinus*] or dish [*paropsis*] in which the Lord supped with his disciples. The same hermit described this event in a history which is called "The Grail" [*De gradali*]. "Grail" is the French name for a broad and somewhat deep dish [*scutella*] in which rich meats in their juice are often set before the wealthy in courses [*gradatim*], one morsel after another, in varied succession. It is also called, in the vernacular, *graalz*, because it is pleasing and acceptable [*grata et acceptabilis*] to those who eat from it, whether on account of the container, which is sometimes made of silver or of other precious materials, or on account of its content, that is the varied succession of rich courses. I have been unable to find this history written in Latin, only a French version possessed by certain nobles is to be had. Nor, as they say, can the whole history easily be found. I have not yet been able to obtain the text for careful reading from anyone. Just as soon as I am able, I will translate the more useful and probable parts briefly into Latin.⁵

This extraordinarily rich entry deserves careful attention. What should we make of Hélinand's assertion that the story of the Grail can be traced back to a vision of an eighth-century British hermit? This information is found in none of the chronicles or histories that Hélinand is known to have used in writing his *Chronicon*. Where did he come upon this fascinating story? Hélinand is obliging in telling us as much as he knows. He says that the hermit saw a vision concerning Joseph of Arimathea and the bowl or dish of the Last Supper, and wrote down what he learned in a Latin book called "The Grail," but that he, Hélinand, has been unable to lay his hands on a copy of this work. All that he has been able to find, he tells us, is "a French version possessed by certain nobles." What is this French version of the Grail story that Hélinand knows about? Among the possible candidates is certainly Robert de Boron's *Estoire dou graal*. In that work Hélinand would have found the association of the Grail with Joseph of Arimathea and the Last Supper, and also the notion that these were to be found written down in an old book. We have seen above that Robert was the first to associate Joseph of Arimathea with the Grail; he also mentions a "great book in which are recorded the histories made and written down by the most learned men," presumably in Latin, and adds that, "in that book, the great secrets are written which are named and called the Grail."⁶ Although Hélinand probably knew Robert's work and used it as one of the sources for his chronicle entry about the Grail, he would not have found there any mention of an eighth-century hermit to whom the Grail mysteries had been revealed.

It is in another French-language historical romance that we find the most likely source of Hélinand's information about the hermit. Sometime between 1220 and 1230 an anonymous writer composed a work with nearly the same title as Robert's, *L'Estoire del saint graal*.⁷ This second history of the Grail was inspired by Robert's earlier account, but it expands and elaborates his materials into a story that

is more than three times as long. The anonymous *Estoire* begins its tale in the year 717 (*Il avint après la passion Jhesucrist .VII. cens et .XVII. ans*) when a hermit-priest living in “one of the wildest places in all of fair Britain [Brittany?]”⁸ received a vision. In the vision, Jesus appeared to the hermit and gave him a small book in which was written the “high history of the Grail—the greatest of all stories” (*si haute estoire com est cele du Graal, ki est estoire de toutes les estoires*).⁹ Hélinand of Froidmont and this anonymous author are the only ones who mention this hermit and who provide such a date and place for the writing of the story of the Grail.

It would seem, then, that Hélinand’s primary sources for his chronicle entry were Robert de Boron’s *Estoire* (i.e., the *Joseph d’Arimathie*) and the anonymous *Estoire del saint graal* written a few years after Robert’s work. He also probably knew Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal*. Hélinand would have found in Robert de Boron’s story the information that the histories of the Grail were written in a great book (*le grant livre*) by great clerks (*par les granz clers*), and that the secrets written therein were called “the Grail.” In the anonymous *Estoire* he would have found a much elaborated version of Robert’s story about Joseph of Arimathea and the vessel of the Last Supper called the Grail, and also the information that this story had been revealed to a hermit living in the eighth century. Hélinand knew these “French writings possessed by certain nobles,” but he confesses that he has been unable to find any trace of the original (Latin) book about the Grail to which they both seem to refer.

Hélinand adduces two other kinds of information to fill out his chronicle entry: evidence derived from the meaning of words, and evidence drawn from the historical accounts found in the Bible. His primary sources, Robert de Boron and the anonymous author of the *Estoire*, like Chrétien before them, offer little help in identifying the kind of vessel that is designated by the term “grail.” Chrétien calls it a “graal,” with no further specification, except to imply that it was

capacious enough to hold a large fish.¹⁰ Robert de Boron describes it as the vessel (*veissel*) in which Jesus “performed his sacrament” and in which Joseph of Arimathea collected Jesus’s blood after the crucifixion.¹¹ The anonymous author of the *Estoire* gives what would seem to be a slightly different interpretation; he calls the Grail an *escuele*, derived from the Latin *scutum* (an oblong shield) and *scutella* (a salver or serving dish), and adds that it is the dish from which Jesus and his disciples ate at the Last Supper.¹² Through a careful reading of his sources in the light of other historical evidence, Hélinand is able to reconcile all of these accounts, and to provide in his brief chronicle entry a succinct etymological and historical description of the Grail.

Hélinand reports that “grail” is the French word for a broad and somewhat deep dish (*scutella*). He may have had independent sources for this interpretation, but he could simply have inferred it from his primary sources, especially from Chrétien, who describes the *graal* as large enough to hold a pike or a lamprey, and from the anonymous *Estoire*, which uses the French equivalent of *scutella*, *escuele*, to describe the Grail. Hélinand adds two fanciful etymological interpretations to fill out his description. He associates the French word “grail” (transliterated into Latinate form as *gradalis* or *gradale*)¹³ with the Latin word *gradatim*, meaning “gradually” or “step-by-step,” and postulates that the name derives from the way it is used to serve food in varied courses. He goes on to offer another etymological interpretation: that the Grail (*graalz*) is so called because it is pleasing (*grata*) and acceptable, whether because it is so beautiful, or because it contains such pleasing things. This latter etymological interpretation is in both Robert de Boron and the anonymous *Estoire*.¹⁴

Hélinand adds one other bit of precise information, which he uses to reconcile the seemingly diverse accounts to be found in his sources. He specifies that the Grail is the serving bowl (*catinus*, in

Latin) or dish (*paropsis*) from which Jesus and his disciples ate at the Last Supper. This new detail Hélinand derives, it seems, from a careful reading of his sources in the light of the Gospel accounts of the Supper. Hélinand recognizes that Robert de Boron does not simply identify the Grail-vessel with the chalice or cup of the mass. Rather, Robert says that the vessel “will be called” the chalice; that is, in the future the chalice of the mass will be taken to represent the original vessel of the Last Supper. When describing the scene of the Last Supper itself, Robert does not speak of a chalice (*calix*) but only of an indefinite “vessel,” and when he describes Joseph of Arimathea collecting Christ’s blood at the burial, it is difficult to imagine him using a cup or chalice for this task. We have suggested above that Robert may have chosen his words carefully in order to make possible the reconciliation of his depiction with Chrétien’s well-known account of the Grail, where it is clearly not a chalice, but a serving bowl.

In the anonymous *Estoire*, Hélinand found confirmation that the Grail was not a chalice, but the platter (*escuele*) in which Jesus and his disciples ate the paschal lamb. Even this description, however, is not without its ambiguity. Although the paschal lamb evokes an image of the sacrificial lamb of the Jewish Passover meal (see Exodus 12:11–12), and thus of a large serving dish, for Christians the “paschal lamb” was not a roasted sheep, but Jesus himself, whom the Apostle Paul referred to as “our paschal lamb [who] has been sacrificed” (1 Corinthians 5:7), and whose body and blood the disciples ate at the Last Supper in the form of bread and wine.

Hélinand’s task as an historian was to make sense out of the information in his sources, to weigh their accuracy and usefulness, and if possible to reconcile apparent contradictions in their accounts. In this instance, his sources (Robert de Boron and the anonymous author of the second *Estoire*) told him that the Grail is a vessel used by Jesus at the Last Supper. Hélinand then could bring to

bear the evidence of the biblical accounts of the Last Supper, in which he found mention of a number of vessels, in addition to the chalice, that are associated with Christ and his sacrament. Hélinand chose two of these as most likely to fit the descriptions that he finds in his Grail-sources. He concludes that the story of the Grail concerns “that serving bowl [*catinus*] or dish [*paropsis*] in which the Lord supped with his disciples.” The *catinus* is mentioned in Mark 14:20: “Truly I say to you,” Jesus tells his disciples, “one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me. . . . It is the one who is dipping his hand in the same bowl [*catinus*] with me.” This is the same kind of tableware about which Jesus earlier had admonished the Pharisees in Luke 11:39: “Now you Pharisees make clean the outside of the cup [*calix*] and the bowl [*catinus*], but inside you are full of extortion and iniquity.” The same incident is reported in Matthew’s Gospel, but there it is a cup (*calix*) and a dish (*paropsis*) that are used as examples (Matthew 23:26). Later in the same Gospel, Matthew names one of the vessels of the Last Supper a *paropsis*: “He who has dipped his hand in the dish [*paropsis*] with me will betray me” (Matthew 26:23). These vessels, Hélinand judged, are most likely what his sources had in mind when they described the Grail as a serving bowl or dish from the Last Supper.

These, then, are the materials out of which Hélinand fashioned his chronicle entry. From the French romance-histories of Robert de Boron and the anonymous elaborator of Robert’s *Estoire*, Hélinand learned that the Grail was a vessel associated with Joseph of Arimathea and with Jesus’s Last Supper and crucifixion. Using the tools of the historian—etymology and comparative history—along with his native intelligence and critical judgment, Hélinand pieced together a plausible description of the Grail. But he did not stop there. He was also led by his sources to believe that a more complete and authoritative account was to be found in a book, written in Latin, and containing the full history of the Grail. Hélinand did his best to find

this book: “I have been unable to find this history written in Latin,” he writes, “only a French version possessed by certain nobles is to be had. Nor, as they say, can the whole history easily be found.”

This last sentiment could be echoed by innumerable scholars from Hélinand’s time down to our own. Despite all efforts, no ancient and authentic sources for the Grail history have been discovered. All that we have are the stories, beginning with Chrétien’s *Conte du Graal*, and continuing through a series of romances and romantic histories that elaborate on the spare theme found there. These sources attempt to understand and to interpret the mystery of the Grail. They add many new things, and prove the Grail to be a fruitful and powerful image for understanding the actions of man and of God in human history, but the new things that they add are the fruits of the literary imagination, not of historical discovery.

To a historian writing some eight hundred years after Hélinand of Froidmont, the evidence appears somewhat different than it did to him, when the Grail was first being discovered and talked about. We can venture to say that the association of the Grail with Joseph of Arimathea and the Last Supper is not an ancient fact, first revealed to a hermit in the eighth century and preserved in authoritative Latin sources, but rather a new invention, a story first told by Robert de Boron, and destined to become one of the best (i.e., the most useful and fruitful) ways to account for the mystery and power of this new thing, the Grail. We can see also how other writers, such as Wolfram von Eschenbach, developed the original story in different ways, emphasizing other aspects of the human and divine that they found implicit in the protean image of the Grail.

But the search for origins is a vital part of the historian’s task, whether in the thirteenth or in the twenty-first century. If we can now begin to give a plausible account of the way the Grail legend developed, from its first telling by Chrétien de Troyes about 1180 in France through to its latest incarnation in a novel, mystery, or news-

paper article in the contemporary press, that is not enough. We wish also to know how the story originated, and to understand, if possible, what moved Chrétien to make a *graal*, a piece of ordinary table-ware, into the centerpiece of “the greatest story that can be told.”

It may be that there was no external source of Chrétien’s inspiration, and that sheer poetic invention led him to imagine a *graal* or serving dish as a potent poetic image. It may also be that there were other written sources, now lost, that Chrétien knew, and that he elaborated in his *Conte du Graal*. But the historian is restricted to the evidence to hand. There is only the slightest hint of such a source in the surviving literature (see Chapter 8), and it tells us little of significance about what the Grail is or where it might have come from. This is doubtless as it should be. The Grail is nothing if not elusive, and the historian is well advised, as was Hélinand of Froidmont, that “the whole history will not be easily found.”

Part II

Before Romance: The Virgin and the Grail in the Pyrenees

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judaea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth.

— ACTS OF THE APOSTLES 1:8

In Part II, I will venture a new hypothesis about the historical origins of the Grail. It is new, not because it adduces hitherto unknown sources, but because it interprets known sources in a new way. The sources themselves are unusual because they are products of the artistic rather than the literary imagination, and because they come from an area not usually associated with Chrétien de Troyes and with the origins of the Grail legends. They are a group of wall paintings, and one wooden sculpture, from the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain. Although famous in their own right as outstanding monuments of early Romanesque art, and (some of them) as masterpieces of artistic achievement, they have not yet been adequately investigated as possible sources for the story of the Holy Grail.

In the high mountains of the eastern Pyrenees a series of village churches, built or rebuilt during the twelfth century, preserve evidence of a particular image found nowhere else in Christendom: the Virgin Mary holding a sacred vessel. The earliest example that can be accurately dated (December 1123) is an apse painting in the church of St. Clement in Taüll (Tahull) of the Virgin Mary holding what has been described as “a fiery Grail.” Similar images of Mary holding a sacred cup, bowl, or chalice are found in at least eight other churches from the same area of the Pyrenees. These images have no clear artistic antecedents, they seem not to have spread outside of this region, nor were similar images made after the twelfth century. The earliest of them antedate the first stories about the Grail by at least fifty years, and may, in fact have provided the particular image that would become, in the hands of Chrétien de Troyes and his successors, the legend of the Holy Grail.

CHAPTER 5

The Bishop of Roda/Barbastre and the Churches of Taüll

Late in the autumn of 1123, the bishop of Roda/Barbastre, Raymund William, set out on a journey into the furthest corner of his diocese, in the high valleys of the eastern Pyrenees.¹ Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Robert de Boron were not yet born, and their stories of the Grail were still far in the future. Bishop Raymund, who would be honored as a saint soon after his death in 1126, had no way of knowing about the stories that would be told by these poets decades later, but he was present, or so it would seem, at the creation of another, and earlier, representation of the Holy Grail—one that was painted on the wall of a church in the Pyrenees. It was to that church that Raymund was traveling.

The bishop and his companions left the cathedral town of Roda, on the Isabena River in the foothills of the Pyrenees, and traveled east to the valley of the Noguera Ribagorçana River. In early November they reached the grand monastery of Alahon, just outside the village of Sopeira, where Raymund consecrated the monastery church.² By early December they had arrived at the village of Taüll, not far beneath the highest peaks of the Pyrenees, on the extreme northeastern edge of the diocese of Roda/Barbastre. On 10 and 11 December 1123, Raymund would consecrate two churches in Taüll,

and it is in one of these that the story of the Pyrenean Grail would seem to begin.³

Because of the importance that we will give to a particular painting in one of these churches, it will be well to learn as much as we can about it. In the next chapter we will look closely at the painting itself; here we will investigate as fully as we can the circumstances surrounding the painting's creation. We begin with Bishop Raymund of Roda, who, among his many other accomplishments, was a noted patron and promoter of ecclesiastical art in his diocese.⁴ (He will also play an unexpected role in the final chapter of this book—but that is to jump ahead of our story.) By accompanying him now on his journey to the village of Taüll, we are able, as it were, to be present at the creation of the image of the Virgin and the Grail that will occupy our attention in the following chapters.

We normally would know very little about the day-to-day activities of medieval bishops, and even their most notable actions rarely leave a trace in the historical record. In this case we are more fortunate. We have both a written and a painted record of Raymund's visit to Taüll in December 1123, and we have also the actual book that Raymund used when he consecrated the two churches in the village. These rare documents allow us the unusual opportunity of observing Raymund at firsthand, and of reconstructing a history of the events that took place in this remote Pyrenean village some nine hundred years ago.

The two dated records commemorating his visit are the formal documents in which the bishop's consecration of the two churches in Taüll was recorded. Normally such documents are written on parchment and sealed within the altar of the church, and such was the case at the parish church of Santa Maria in the center of the village.⁵ In the church of St. Clement, on the outskirts of town, no parchment document has been found; instead, the record of con-

separation was painted on a column inside the church, for all to see (see Fig. 3, p. 90). In elegant lettering it reads: “In the year of the incarnation of the Lord 1123, the tenth day of December, Raymund, bishop of Barbastre, came here and consecrated this church in honor of St. Clement Martyr, placing in the altar relics of St. Cornelius Bishop and Martyr.”⁶

The other surviving witness to Raymund’s activities in Taüll is in the form of a book that Raymund had compiled for his own use as bishop of Roda. The “Book of St. Raymund” is a parchment volume of 225 folios (550 pages), much worn by time and use. It was preserved, perhaps, as a relic of the saintly bishop after his death. Today it is to be found in the public library of Tarragona, southwest of Barcelona.⁷ The handwritten book measures only 19.5 by 12 centimeters (less than 8 by 5 inches), about the size of a small, but very thick, paperback book. Like most medieval books, it is a composite volume, made up of many different pieces. At its core is an important collection of canon law texts, the *Collectio Terraconensis*, that fills up folios 13–192.⁸ On and around the pages containing these legal texts are copied other documents, written by or for Raymund and his immediate predecessors in the see of Roda. These offer precious insight into the thought and actions of our bishop, and reveal something of the political and religious context within which the paintings of Taüll were made.

The diocese of Roda was neither an ancient nor a powerful see, and it had a precarious existence during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The bishops had to be continually on their guard to protect their rights and privileges. The southern parts of the diocese were constantly threatened, and often occupied, by Muslim warriors. To the west, the bishops of Huesca/Jaca pressed claims on part of Roda’s territory. To the east was the ancient and powerful diocese of Urgell, whose bishops sought to subject Roda to their own au-

thority. In addition, the political, economic, and religious interests of the king of Aragon, and of the many counts and powerful families in the region, had to be considered.

Bishop Raymund was not a native of the immediate area. He was born on the other side of the Pyrenees, just west of Foix in the town of Durban, and educated in the famous house of the Augustinian canons at St. Sernin in Toulouse.⁹ The new church of St. Sernin, one of the masterpieces of Romanesque art and architecture, was built during Raymund's time there.¹⁰ In 1101 he was elected prior of St. Sernin, and it was in that capacity that he was invited to the court of King Pedro I of Aragon and, much to his surprise, the stories say, was elected to the bishopric of Roda.

As an outsider, Raymund took care to learn as much as he could about the situation of his diocese. He collected, for example, an unusual memorandum describing the history of the counts and the bishops of the region.¹¹ The text must have been useful to the bishop in his struggles with his powerful secular and ecclesiastical neighbors, and in his appeals to the pope concerning these matters. For us, it not only provides a rare glimpse of the way a diocese could come into being in the rough-and-tumble world of the central Middle Ages, but also reveals something of the complexity of the culture—at once intensely local and yet open to far-flung influences—that gave birth, among other things, to an unusual religious image of the Virgin Mary holding a fiery grail.

Raymund's memorandum describes how the diocese of Roda had come to be formed, in Carolingian times, out of the three Pyrenean counties of Ribagorça, Pallars, and Sobrarbe. The account begins with Count Bernard of Ribagorça and his brother Ato, the bishop. Early in the tenth century, we are told, Muslim warriors invaded the region; they were repelled from Ribagorça itself by Count Bernard, and from the county of Pallars by his brother, Bishop Ato, who thus became bishop of Pallars and Ribagorça. When Count Bernard sub-

sequently married Toda, the daughter of the count of Sobrarbe, all three counties, Ribagorça, Pallars, and Sobrarbe, came under Bernard's lordship, and Ato became the bishop of the church in these family lands.¹²

The memorandum then traces the descent of the subsequent counts and bishops of the region. It tells how Bishop Aimeric (976–1017) was captured by Muslim raiders in the town of Roda in 1006, and, leaving a nephew behind as hostage, had to travel to France to gather money for his ransom.¹³

The next bishop, Borrell (1017–1027), was chosen by the greater abbots of the region. His election and consecration took place in Urgell, the seat of an old and powerful diocese to the east of Ribagorça, a fact that indicates a reliance on this neighboring bishopric in troubled times. He was followed by Arnulf (1027–1064), who was consecrated even further afield, in Bordeaux, and who was apparently the choice of King Sancho the Great of Aragon. Next was Solomon (1064?–1075), a monk from the important Benedictine monastery of Ripoll, in Catalonia, who “strengthened the diocese in so far as he was able, with the help of King Ramiro of Aragon.”¹⁴

Bishop Solomon was succeeded by Raymund of Dalmatia, who, with the support and prayers of King Sancho Ramiro, turned the poor diocese into a “middling” (*mediocris*) one. He also made Roda the site of his episcopal cathedral.¹⁵ After Raymund of Dalmatia's death, Pons (1097–1104), a monk from Sainte Foy in Conques (France), was elected bishop. He was called bishop of Barbastre, because in his day (1100) the important town of Barbastre, in the southern part of the diocese, had been reconquered from the Muslims. Pons was esteemed by his contemporaries, and in Rome itself, for his learning in canon law, and he received important privileges from popes Urban II and Paschal II concerning the boundaries, parish churches, and monasteries of his diocese.¹⁶

Raymund William (St. Raymund, 1104–1126) was a worthy suc-

cessor of Pons as bishop of Roda/Barbastre. He inherited his predecessor's interest in the law of the church, preserving in his book not only one of the great legal collections of the eleventh century, the *Collectio Tarragonensis*, but also copies of the papal letters and episcopal correspondence concerning his diocese.¹⁷

Raymund also included in his book copies of liturgical formulae that were relevant to the particular problems he encountered in his episcopal activities. For example, on folios 222v–223r one finds copied the “Rite for reconciling an apostate” (*Ordo ad reconciliandum apostatam*), by means of which one who has left the Christian faith can be received back into the Church.¹⁸ Apostasy was a perennial problem for Iberian bishops, especially since the eighth-century Muslim conquests of much of the peninsula. It must have been a very immediate concern for Bishop Raymund in the years following the Christian reconquest of the town of Barbastre on the southern fringe of his diocese in 1100.¹⁹ Barbastre, with the protection and patronage of its conqueror, Pedro I of Aragon, soon became once again a thriving cosmopolitan center, with a Jewish community, foreign merchants, and of course a native population that had lived much of their lifetime under Muslim rule.²⁰ In such a setting there must have been many opportunities to reconcile lapsed Catholics and reintegrate them into the Christian community.

Such a rite was less likely to be used in the northern reaches of the diocese. There the towns and villages were smaller and more homogeneous, and their inhabitants had never come under Muslim rule. It was for another purpose that Raymund and his entourage traveled into the upper Ribagorça region in 1123. One of the most important, and most impressive, duties of a twelfth-century bishop was to consecrate the churches in his diocese. It was to perform this office that Raymund came to the remote village of Taüll in the early days of December 1123, and his book allows us to be present, in a way, at those festivities.

Following the right (west) bank of the Noguera de Tor River, they came to the village of Erill la Vall in the Boi Valley, one of the seats of the powerful Erill family.²¹ There they crossed the river, passed through the village of Boi, the traditional political center of the region, and climbed another three kilometers to reach the village of Taüll at the head of the valley. Beyond this village, then as now, was the wilderness of the high Pyrenees. Today the town is the gateway to a popular ski resort and a large wilderness park. The whole area is usually snow-covered from December to April, and snow may have already begun to fall when Raymund and his entourage arrived.

The village of Taüll was home to a few hundred persons at most, but by 10 December 1123 it would have been teeming with visitors from the surrounding communities and from further afield. The consecration of a church was a major social and religious event in the twelfth century. Contemporary documents describing the scene of similar consecrations in the area tell us that they were attended by “a crowd of all the clergy and the laity, both men and women, living in the region,” and add that “many others came from distant parts.”²² Among the visitors one would expect to find the nobles of the region and of the realm, and especially the lords who had endowed and constructed the churches about to be dedicated.

Raymund had come to dedicate two churches, one on the outskirts of the village, and the other about 400 meters (450 yards) further up the road, in the central plaza. He began with the church on the outskirts, which was destined to be the recipient of an important endowment, namely, some relics of St. Cornelius, the early Christian pope and martyr who died in 253. These relics had apparently been brought from Rome, perhaps by Bishop Raymund himself, who had visited the city in 1120.²³ The relics of St. Cornelius had originally been preserved in a magnificent church built near the Roman catacombs of Callistus, and had been translated in the ninth

century to the church of S. Maria in Trastevere, not far from St. Peter's Basilica, by Pope Gregory IV (827–844).²⁴ We have no idea what moved the current pope, Callistus II (1119–1124), or the Roman clergy, to make some relics of St. Cornelius available to visitors from the Pyrenees, nor do we know how it was decided to place some of these relics in a small church in an obscure corner of the diocese of Roda, but their presence there marks this church as one of particular prestige and importance (Fig. 1).

Another indication of the cosmopolitan connections of this little church on the outskirts of Taüll may be seen the choice of its spiritual patron, St. Clement, the famous first-century bishop of Rome and successor of St. Peter. The choice of this dedication, like the presence of the relics of St. Cornelius, may reveal the interests and influence of the bishop of Roda himself, or of someone else who had recently visited Rome.²⁵ Such a visitor could scarcely have failed to be impressed by the beautiful new Roman basilica of San Clemente, completed in the first decades of the twelfth century.²⁶ Whatever the message intended by this choice of patron saint and of precious relics, there can be no doubt that the consecration of the church of St. Clement in 1123 was an event of even more than usual importance in the valleys of the Pyrenees.

No contemporary account of the consecrations at Taüll has survived, but we can reconstruct from the liturgical instructions in Bishop Raymund's book much of what happened there.²⁷ Because the liturgy of church consecration was one of the most popular and impressive forms of public activity in twelfth-century Europe, and because it constitutes the immediate context for the paintings in the church of St. Clement, I will describe it in some detail.

On Monday morning, the tenth of December, the bishop and clergy and all the people gathered at the church. Twelve candles were lit around the interior walls, and everyone except a single deacon was expelled from the building. The bishop, the clergy, and the people

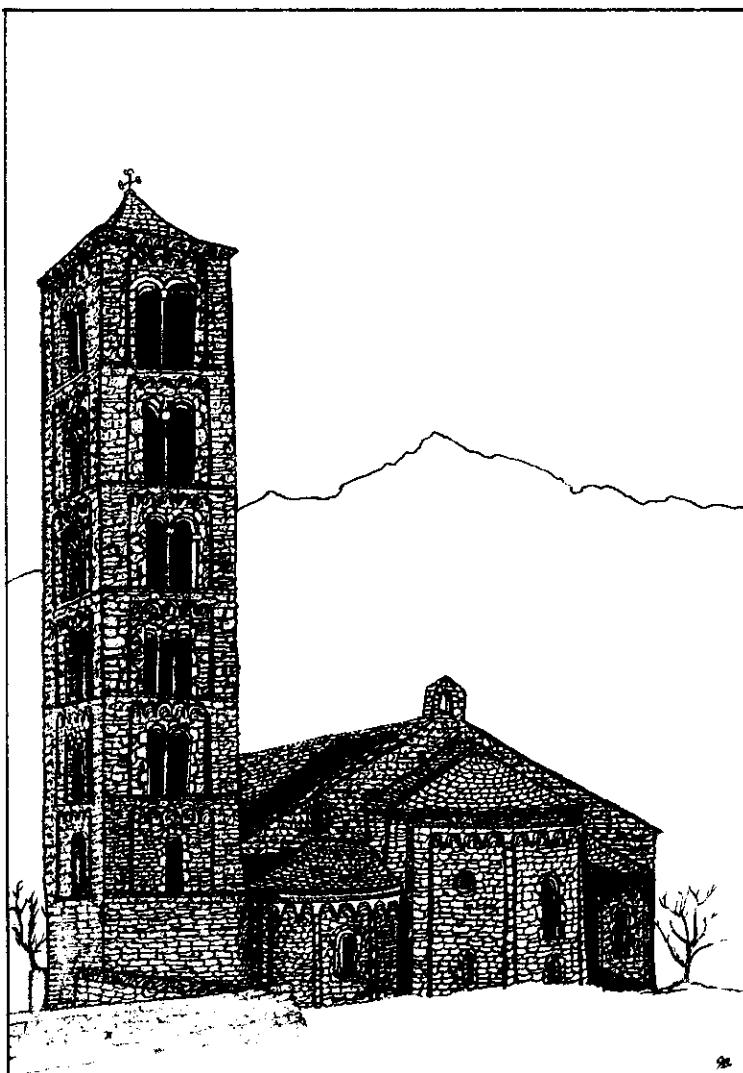


Fig. 1 Church of St. Clement of Taüll (Randall Rosenfeld).

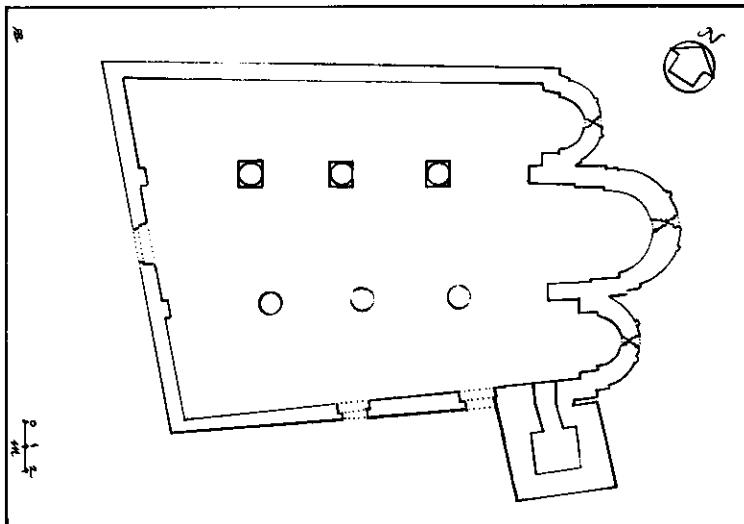


Fig. 2 Ground plan of St. Clement of Taüll (Randall Rosenfeld).

walked around the church while the bishop sprinkled the walls with holy water and the choir sang “The Lord has founded his house.”²⁸ When they had come full circle, back to the main door, the bishop prayed briefly for God’s help and protection. He then knocked with his pastoral staff on the lintel of the doorway, and intoned: “Be lifted up ye doors . . . and the king of glory will enter in.” The deacon, inside the church, responded: “Who is the king of glory?” and the bishop replied, “The Lord, strong and mighty.” Twice more the procession wound its way around the outside of the building, and the bishop knocked on the doorway. On the third time, the door opened, and the bishop and clergy entered. The bishop sang: “Peace be on this house,” and the door was closed behind him (Fig. 2).

Once inside the church, the bishop and his clergy set about the consecration. They began by singing a litany, asking the aid of Christ, the holy angels, and the saints in building and blessing the

church. Then one of the clerics spread ashes across the floor in the form of a cross, from the northeast to the southwest corner and from the southeast to the northwest corner of the church. The bishop then began to inscribe the entire Greek and Latin alphabets in the ashes with his pastoral staff. Starting in the northeast corner, he formed the Greek letters: ΑΒΓΔΕΖΗΘΙΚΑΜΝΞΟΠΣΤΥΦΧΨΩ. Then, beginning in the southeast corner, he wrote the Latin alphabet: ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ. While he drew these letters, the clergy sang the antiphon, “O how awesome is this place, truly this is the house of God and the door of heaven,” and the canticle, “Blessed God, Lord of Israel.”

Then, going to the main altar, in the church’s central apse, they sang: “God, come to my aid.” Here the bishop again exorcised and blessed water and salt, to which he added ashes and wine. He then approached the altar, and with his thumb made three crosses in the middle of it with the holy water, praying: “Let this altar be made holy, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” He repeated this gesture on the right and left sides and on the four corners of the altar, and then, with a branch of hyssop, he sprinkled the altar three times, while the antiphon “Cleanse me, O Lord, with hyssop” and the psalm “Have mercy on me, O God,” were sung.

The bishop next walked three times around the interior walls, sprinkling them with holy water, while other antiphons and psalms were sung. He completed the aspersion of the church by sprinkling the form of a cross on the pavement, from front to back and from side to side. This was followed by the prayers of consecration, dedicating the church in honor of the holy and most victorious cross, and St. Clement. At the completion of the prayers, the bishop returned to the altar, and, while the choir sang “I will go up to the altar of God, to God who makes happy my youth,” and “Judge me, O God, and hear my cause,” the bishop poured out the holy water at

the base of the altar, and with what remained, he made a mortar of ground lime, tile, and water, with which he would later seal up the altar, with the relics inside.

Next, the bishop and his clergy exited the church and joined the people assembled around the tent where the relics of St. Cornelius had been placed, and where a vigil had been kept the night before. Entering the tent, the bishop and his clergy sang the antiphons “Behold the people who keep your judgments,” and “Move, O saints, from your mansions; hurry to the places prepared for you.” After a prayer, they lifted the box containing the relics of St. Cornelius onto a platform, and the priests carried it out “with great honor and praise,” accompanied by a cross, incense, and many candles. Before they entered the church, however, they processed once more around the outside singing the verse “If I shall return prosperously to my father’s house,” with the response “The Lord will be my God.” The whole body of people followed, including women and children, singing the *Kyrie eleison* (Lord have mercy).

At the door of the church, the bishop asked for silence, and then spoke to the people about the honor due to this church, about its tithes, first-fruits, and offerings, and about its dedication. He admonished particularly the lord who had built the church of St. Clement (*dominus et constructor ipsius ecclesie*) concerning its endowment, and the honor that should be shown to the church and to its priests. The lord then promised formally, in the midst of the assembled multitude, to heed the bishop’s admonitions.

Bishop Raymund next joined the priests who were carrying the relics into the church as the choir sang: “Enter, blessed ones of God, a dwelling place is prepared for you by the Lord.” When they came to the altar where the relics of St. Cornelius were to be placed, they stretched a veil between the clergy and the people, and the bishop placed the relics inside the base of the altar, while the clerics sang an

antiphon (“The holy ones will exult in glory; they will rejoice in their tents”) and a psalm (“Sing to the Lord a new song”).

Before sealing the relics inside the altar, the bishop made the sign of the cross with holy chrism (a mixture of olive oil and balsam) on the four inside corners of the altar’s base. Chrism and holy oils play a fundamental part in this and other rituals, and their possible relevance to the depiction of a holy Grail in this church will be discussed below. Chrism was used not only for the consecration of churches, but also for baptisms, confirmations, and priestly ordinations. The richness of the olive oil and the fragrance of the balsam, according to ancient traditions, represent the fullness of grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and impart these to the church and to all who are anointed with holy chrism.²⁹ Only bishops have the right to consecrate the chrism, and they do so once a year, in an impressive ceremony on the Thursday before Easter Sunday.

Raymund included in his book a copy of the ritual for the Easter blessing of the holy oils.³⁰ It begins by requiring that bells be rung early in the morning of Holy Thursday to summon everyone to the church where the chrism is to be consecrated. Three vials of pure olive oil, one for the oil to be used in anointing the sick and in exorcising the possessed, one for the oil of the catechumens, and one for holy chrism, are prepared and wrapped in white cloth. Another vessel, containing balsam, an aromatic unguent derived from the resin of certain coniferous trees, is brought to the bishop, who blesses it before the mass begins. During mass, the bishop consecrates the oil for the anointing of the sick and exorcisms. At the conclusion of the mass, the bishop returns to his seat and awaits with his deacons the procession of the oil of the catechumens and of the chrism.

The procession of the oils is an elaborate and imposing affair, repeated every year in each cathedral church throughout Christendom. One might even imagine that the Grail-processions as de-

scribed by Chrétien de Troyes and Wolfram von Eschenbach owe something of their inspiration to this public liturgy, which Raymund's book describes as follows: At the head of the procession of the oils are two acolytes carrying lighted candelabra. These are followed by two clerics bearing crosses, and by an acolyte with the vial of oil for the chrism. Behind these come two more clerics burning incense, accompanied by an acolyte carrying the oil for the catechumens. The Gospel Book is carried next, and it is followed by twelve priests from the diocese, all in their finest vestments, who will cooperate in the consecration of the "most holy mystery of the chrism" (*sacrosancti crismatis misterii*). The procession is completed by choir boys, who sing verses in praise of the mystery of the holy chrism (*in laudem eiusdem misterii*).

The vials of oil, along with a vial of balsam, are brought to the bishop at the altar, and he speaks to the assembled clergy and people about the consecration of the chrism. The bishop then mixes the oil and the balsam, pronouncing the blessings. As he unveils the chrism, he and the clergy salute it, singing: "O holy unction of salvation, Ave. Ave, holy chrism." The oil of the catechumens is then blessed in the same way, and finally the oil of the infirm, both with appropriate prayers. Then the procession forms again in front of the altar, and the bishop leads them out of the church and into the sacristy, following the same order by which they had entered.

It was this holy chrism, consecrated in the cathedral of Roda during the week before Easter 1123, that Raymund used to sign the inside of the altar base at Taüll, where the relics of St. Cornelius were to be deposited. He then took three pieces of a consecrated host (*tres portiones corporis domini*) and three grains of incense, and placed these, along with the relics, inside the base of the altar, while the clergy sang "You took seats under the altar of the Lord," with other songs and antiphons. The stone altar slab was then fixed in place on its base, and sealed with the mortar mixed earlier in the day. After

incensing the repository and the altar, the bishop took holy oil and made a cross in the middle of the altar and on its four corners, and then spread oil with his hand over the entire altar stone, while singing: “Jacob erected a stone marker, pouring oil on it.” Then he took the aromatic chrism and, in the same way, spread it with his hand over the entire altar, singing: “Behold the fragrance of my Son.” With the chrism, the bishop proceeded to circle the inside of the church, making twelve crosses with his thumb on the walls, and saying each time, “Let this temple be made holy in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” while the choir sang, “This is the house of the Lord, firmly built.”

Returning to the altar, the bishop again offered incense over it, and sang, “Moses built an altar to the Lord God.” He then proceeded to consecrate the altar stone, the altar cloths (*lintheamina*), and the corporal cloths (*corporalia*) on which the body and blood of Christ would be placed during the mass, with prayers and blessings appropriate to each. This finished, the bishop retired to the sacristy at the side of the church, while the deacons clothed the altar and acolytes lit candles for the mass of consecration.

The rites for consecrating the eucharistic paten and chalice are found in Raymund’s book after the order of the mass of consecration. Perhaps he blessed these objects during the mass itself. The prayer over the paten reads: “Let us consecrate and sanctify this paten for the breaking in it of the body of our Lord Jesus Christ, suffering the cross for the salvation of us all.” The prayer over the chalice asks God to pour out his blessing on the hands of the bishop as he anoints the chalice with chrism, praying that “this vessel [*vasculum*] might be sanctified by our blessing, so that it may be made a new tomb for the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit.” At the same time, the bishop consecrated the wood of the new cross for the church, marking it with incense and chrism.³¹

This was the rite in which the clergy and people participated on 10 December 1123, in the church of St. Clement, just outside the village of Taüll. The next day, the bishop consecrated the parish church of Santa Maria and the cemetery in the center of the village.³² Impressive as these ceremonies must have been at the time, they are not the reason that the churches of Taüll are remembered today. These churches in the high Pyrenees would be of no more (and no less) interest to historians than the thousands of others that were built and consecrated across Christendom during this period were it not for something else that happened in them at the same time. These two churches in the village of Taüll had the singular good fortune of being covered, inside and out, with some of the finest fresco paintings of the Middle Ages.³³ When these paintings were rediscovered, early in the twentieth century, they caused an immediate stir in the world of art and of scholarship, and they have lost none of their fascination since then.

The paintings in the Boi Valley were first brought to the attention of the modern world when they were copied in 1908 by Joan Vallhonrat i Sadurní.³⁴ He was a friend and colleague of Pablo Picasso; together they had attended the School of Fine Arts (Llotja) in Barcelona in 1896–1897, where, incidentally, Picasso received a mark of 76 for the course and Vallhonrat an 89.³⁵ Vallhonrat had come to the attention of the Institute of Catalan Studies and the Association of Museums of Barcelona, and in January 1908 he was asked to travel to Taüll and produce copies of the paintings of St. Clement, Santa Maria, and St. John of Boi that had been uncovered there by a mission of the association in the previous year.

When Vallhonrat arrived in Taüll, he began his work in the church of St. Clement. He would not have been aware that the entire church had once been covered with fresco images. Only the paintings in the central apse and a few other fragments had escaped the coats of whitewash that had covered the walls over the centuries.

The central apse paintings themselves were mostly hidden, and protected, behind a decorated wooden screen that had been placed between the altar and the back wall of the church as long ago as the thirteenth or fourteenth century. By the end of June 1908, the gothic screen had been removed, and Vallhonrat had completed a large copy (3.9 meters) of the entire ensemble of Romanesque paintings in the main apse, and a smaller copy of a detail from the apse. From there he moved on to the church of St. John in Boi, and in 1909 he returned to Taüll to copy some of the frescos from Santa Maria. All of these are outstanding reproductions, faithful to the originals in both form and coloration. They were quickly made available to a wide public when the Institute of Catalan Studies published full-color reproductions in fascicle three of *Les pintures murals catalanes*.³⁶

A few years later most of the known paintings from Taüll and Boi were carefully removed from the walls of the churches and transported to the Museum of the Art of Catalonia in Barcelona, where they are still on display. Subsequent research and conservation have recovered and restored quite a few additional fragments of mural paintings in these churches and deepened our understanding of how the twelfth-century muralists went about their work. These paintings became, during the twentieth century, some of the best known and most admired products of Romanesque art.

The twelfth-century artists who produced these decorations of the churches of Taüll and Boi are anonymous. Several hands have been identified at work in the surviving paintings. But in each church there seems to have been a primary painter, the “master” in charge of the decorations, whose work can be seen especially in the most conspicuous, and sacred, part of the church—the central apse enclosing the high altar. It is one of these artists, the Master of St. Clement of Taüll, who will be the object of our attention in the following pages. He has been called “the towering figure in twelfth-century Catalan wall painting,”³⁷ “the greatest of all wall painters of

twelfth-century Spain,”³⁸ and “the most significant artistic talent active in Spain in the twelfth century.”³⁹ This is high praise, no doubt. But it will be suggested below that another, and more unusual, title might be added to his credit: the inventor of the holy Grail.

CHAPTER 6

The Master of St. Clement

More than one artist produced the paintings in the church of St. Clement in Taüll, but the anonymous person who decorated the central apse around the time that the church was consecrated in December 1123 is at the center of this story. It is he, I will suggest, who produced the earliest datable image of something that can be called a “holy Grail.” His was an invention of the artistic imagination; he knew nothing of the later stories of the Holy Grail as elaborated by Chrétien de Troyes and his successors. One might say, instead, that when he discovered a new and unusual way to depict the Virgin Mary—holding a radiant vessel that might have been called a “grail” in the local language—he planted a seed that would later bear fruit in the Holy Grail of the poets and storytellers.

Like the storytellers whom we considered earlier, all that we know of this so-called Master of St. Clement is what can be gleaned from the artistic productions that he has left behind. We presume that he was male because artists needed to be free to move from place to place to practice their craft, and an itinerant life was difficult, if not impossible, for women in this time and place.

More surprising, perhaps, is the evidence that he was literate. The ability to read and write was a skill to be found almost exclusively among clerics; few craftsmen of the time are thought to have

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Fig. 3 Record of consecration from the church of St. Clement, Taüll. Fresco. Circa 1123. Institut d'Estudis Catalans, *Les pintures murals Catalanes*, 4 fasc. (Barcelona 1907), 3, 28, fig. 24.

attended school, or to have learned the art of “letters.” The Master of St. Clement, as we shall see, made painted inscriptions of the names of saints and Apostles a prominent part of his composition. It is possible, of course, that he copied these inscriptions from a book or exemplar, but their number, their accuracy, and their style suggest rather that they are the work of the artist himself. This is confirmed, it seems, by the most important piece of historical evidence in the church, the record of the consecration that was painted in the same elegant Visigothic display script, and using the same colors, as the apse paintings (Fig. 3).

The inscription memorializes the visit of Bishop Raymund and his consecration of the church on 10 December 1123. It reminds all visitors to the church that it is dedicated to St. Clement, and that the relics of St. Cornelius are to be found there. It reads:

ANNO AB INCARNACIONE
DOMINI M. C. XX. III. IIII IDUS DECEMBRIS

VENIT RAIMUNDUS EPISCOPUS BARBASTRE-
NSIS ET CONSECRAVIT HANC ECCLESIAM IN HONORE
SANCTI CLEMENTIS MARTYRIS ET PONENS RELIQUIAS
IN ALTARE SANCTI CORNELII EPISCOPI ET MARTYRIS

[In the year of the incarnation of the Lord 1123, the fourth day before the ides of December (i.e., 10 December), Raymund, bishop of Barbastre, came here and consecrated this church in honor of St. Clement Martyr, placing in the altar relics of St. Cornelius Bishop and Martyr.]

The writing has been called a “childish scrawl” by one historian,¹ but it is, in fact, a fine example of the complex and intricate display script used by skilled scribes in the visigothic realms of Spain and southern France in this period. The use of this script by the Master of St. Clement might suggest that he was not a foreigner, but a native of the region where visigothic script was written. This suggestion would appear to be strengthened by recent studies of the pigments used in the paintings.² Although expensive pigments, made from such imported minerals as azurite, are used elsewhere in Catalonian wall painting, the Master of St. Clement produced his effects with materials and pigments available locally, in the Iberian peninsula and the Pyrenees.³

Stylistic evidence from the paintings themselves is more difficult to interpret. Art historians have differed in their judgments of the artistic influences that shaped the style of the Master of St. Clement. The official guide to the Romanesque collection in Barcelona’s Museum of the Art of Catalonia, where the original apse frescoes are now conserved, tells us that “very few stylistic analogies have been established to explain the origin of the painter who executed one of the most perfect works in Romanesque art. Moreover, the scant comparisons which have been made are controversial.”⁴ Some detect in his work the influence of the art of Constantinople and of the Byzantine empire. Others affirm that he was familiar with the work of contemporary painters in Lombardy and northern Italy, or with

the Christian art of Muslim Spain. And recently it has been argued that he was especially influenced by the monumental style of the artists active in the regions of Toulouse and Poitiers, in the south of France.⁵

Failing more certain knowledge, we may be permitted to imagine the Master of St. Clement as a native of the kingdom of Aragon or of one of the Occitan or Catalan counties, and as someone who, in the service of Raymund of Barbastre, may well have accompanied the bishop on his various journeys to Toulouse and the Languedoc, as well as through northern Italy and on to Rome. Such a portrait is at least consistent with the evidence, and might account neatly for many of stylistic influences that scholars have identified in his paintings. Above all, however, the Master of St. Clement was an extremely talented artist. A master of color and of form, he infused traditional religious themes with a vigor and realism that are unmatched elsewhere in Romanesque art.⁶

The original paintings by the Master are preserved today in Barcelona's National Museum of the Art of Catalonia, and high-quality replicas of the frescoes have recently been installed back in the church of St. Clement in Taüll. Although the museum setting is elegant and thoughtfully designed, it is no substitute for the original location. At Taüll the paintings in the apse are seen primarily in the light of the narrow central window (see Pl. 1). The upper part of the apse is dominated by a figure of Christ in Majesty, surrounded by angels and figures of the four evangelists holding the animals that are their usual symbols (see Pls. 2–5). These figures are set against three bands of background color—dark blue at the top, a warm ocher in the middle, and a bright blue at the bottom. The majestic figure of Christ is placed within an ellipse of iridescent colors outlined with pearls. Christ is seated on a transverse band decorated with foliage. Behind his head is a pure white nimbus in which is set a cross. The Greek letters *Alpha* and *Omega* (see Apoc. 1:8: “I am alpha

and omega, the beginning and the end, says the Lord") are suspended from the arms of the cross, as in contemporary Iberian crucifixes.⁷ Christ holds his right hand in blessing, and with his left hand he balances on his knee a book open at the place that reads: "Ego sum lux mundi" (I am the light of the world; John 8:12). He is clothed in a gray tunic with a broad white band at the neck and running down the left side, a bright blue cloak trimmed in red, and a red belt. Christ's head, hands, and feet are delicately modeled in a fashion that conveys both the majesty and the humanity of the figure.

The clarity and purity of the colors, here and elsewhere, are particularly striking. The effect was achieved by modifying somewhat the traditional technique of fresco painting, in which pigments, dissolved in water, are applied to fresh mortar on the walls. The intense chromatic effects at St. Clement were apparently the result of superimposing several layers of paint on top of the traditional fresco base. Thus a blue pigment, obtained from the local mineral aerinite, was applied over a layer of black, and a light red pigment, cinnabar, was laid on top of the blood-red of the iron oxide, hematite.⁸

Winged figures of the four evangelists encircle Christ on his heavenly throne, illustrating the vision of John's Apocalypse: "And before the throne there is as it were a sea of glass, like crystal, and round the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all round and within, and day and night they never cease to sing: 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!' " (Apoc. 4:6–8; cf. Ezekiel 1:4–21).⁹

On the upper left is Matthew ("with the face of a man"), holding

his gospel book (see Pl. 2). The impression of marvelous movement around the throne is reinforced by the unusual detail of his cloak being wrapped tightly around his legs. Below is Mark, gesturing toward Christ with his left hand and holding fast to the hind leg of a winged lion with his right (see Pl. 3). On the upper right is John, with his eagle cradled firmly in the folds of his cloak (see Pl. 4). And below him is St. Luke, grasping a magnificent ox firmly by the tail (see Pl. 5). The swirling but dignified movement of Luke and Mark, and their respective animals, around the throne is suggested ingeniously by the intertwined and twisting bands, blue on one side and ocher on the other, that frame the figures. There is nothing quite like this depiction anywhere else in Romanesque painting. It fully justifies the exclamation of a well-known historian and art critic that the Master of St. Clement was “one of the most astonishing inventors of forms of the entire Romanesque period.”¹⁰

In the zone beneath, against a red background and enclosed in a series of niches formed by paintings of decorated columns and arches, are figures of the Virgin Mary and the Apostles, ranked on either side of the single window in the apse. Each figure is identified by an inscription written in Visigothic display script. St. Mary (s. MARIA) and St. John (s. IOANES) stand on either side of the central window. Next to Mary, to her right, are St. Bartholomew (s. BARTOLOMEE) and St. Thomas (s. TOMAS), and flanking John is St. James (s. IACHOBE). Other Apostles were originally depicted here, but the paintings have been lost or obscured over the centuries. A fragment of the figure of St. Peter is still to be found in the church, at the extreme left of the row of Apostles, and next to him, on the pillar of the triumphal arch facing into the nave of the church, the figure of St. Clement, to whom the church is dedicated.¹¹

This depiction of the “apostolic college” (*apostolado*) in conjunction with the scene of Christ in Majesty was very popular in the Iberian peninsula.¹² The inclusion of Mary among the Apostles is

less common, but it is found rather frequently in the twelfth-century paintings from this part of the Pyrenees, as we shall see in the next chapter. The Master of St. Clement has integrated these figures of Mary and the Apostles admirably into the composition. The person of Christ dominates the scene, both in heaven and on earth, but Mary and the Apostles, through their carefully modulated sizes, forms, and gestures, convey an unquestioned dignity, and constitute an altogether imposing group just above the level of the viewer in the church.

The figure that interests us here is that of the Virgin Mary (see Pl. 6). She wears a white wimple or headdress with a red and white fringed cloth around her shoulders. The edges of her blue cloak are decorated with a complex design of red, blue, and black, embellished with pearls. She holds her right hand open toward the viewer. Her left hand is enfolded within her cloak, and in this covered hand she holds a shallow bowl from which luminous reddish-orange rays stream forth.

The Virgin at the head of the apostolic college is an uncommon artistic theme, and Mary holding a vessel of any sort seems to be attested nowhere else in Christian art before this time.¹³ Such an unusual depiction of the Virgin Mary¹⁴ may well have occasioned comment among those who first saw the painting, and they may have asked themselves just what it is that she is holding in her covered left hand. One answer that might have occurred to them is that she is holding a “grail.” Not, of course, the Grail of Arthurian romance—that Grail was not yet invented or thought about. But rather they may have called the shallow bowl in her left hand a “grail” because that is the name given in this very region to such an object in everyday use. The word “grail” is first attested in precisely this region during the tenth century to designate a kind of table furnishing, and this picture suits the description of “grails” known to us from the twelfth- and thirteenth-century literature (see Chap-

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Fig. 4 Three magi and their grails. Detail from the west wall of Santa Maria of Taüll. Fresco. Circa 1123. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Fig. 5 Last Supper (detail). From the church of St. Baudel near Berlanga. Fresco. Circa 1120–1140. Maria Antoinette Evans Fund. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

ter 1). Bowls of similar shape and size are common in the contemporary art of nearby churches. For example, in the neighboring church of Santa Maria of Taüll the three kings appear before Herod carrying their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh for the Christ child in just such bowls (Fig. 4). In the depiction of the Last Supper from the church of San Baudel de Berlanga (now in the Boston Museum of Fine Art), the table is set with similar shallow dishes, each containing a large fish (Fig. 5).

That the grail held by the Virgin of Taüll is a holy vessel, or at least contains something holy, is demonstrated by the way she holds it in her covered hand—a traditional gesture signifying the sacredness of the thing she is bearing—and by the reddish-orange rays emanating from the bowl. It would be accurate, then, to describe this painting in the church of St. Clement of Taüll as an image of the Virgin Mary with a holy grail. What might have moved the artist to introduce a piece of common tableware into his painting, and to treat it as something holy, is hard to discern. Perhaps there was a local tradition in the Pyrenees that told a story of the Virgin appearing with a fiery dish or bowl; if so, no trace of such has yet been found.¹⁵ But whatever the cause, it is fitting that we give tentative credit to the Master of St. Clement, that “most astonishing inventors of forms of the entire Romanesque period,” for inventing this image, or at the very least for presenting it in a wonderfully striking and beautiful way.

Should we also associate this image with the famous Grail of the Arthurian romances, composed more than fifty years later by Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Robert de Boron? Modern scholars have not been slow to make this association. Chandler Rathfon Post, whose *History of Spanish Painting* (1930) remains authoritative, and who was steeped in the scholarship on these Romanesque murals from the time of their discovery, describes the image in St. Clement thus: “Amidst the Apostles . . .

appears the Virgin holding a cup which has been tentatively explained as the Holy Grail because Montserrat in Catalonia is connected with this legend and because the vessel seems to be filled with the Sacred Blood emitting miraculous rays.”¹⁶ Otto Demus, in his magisterial survey of *Romanesque Mural Painting*, is unequivocal. He writes of this image: “The Virgin . . . holds up a dish filled with the glowing blood of Christ, a reminder that Catalonia was one of the centres of the cult of the Grail.” Demus adds: “The pictorial representation of the Grail . . . evidently precedes by a number of decades the earliest known treatments of the legend in poetry.”¹⁷ In his *Pictorial Arts of the West, 800–1200*, C. R. Dodwell echoes these views, and discusses this image as one of “the earliest allusion[s] to the Grail in art or literature.”¹⁸

Caution is called for. These interpretations presume that already in 1123 there existed a popular story of the Grail to which the Master of St. Clement could “allude” in his painting. They assume, further, that the story to which the painter makes allusion is one that associates the Grail with a eucharistic chalice and with the blood of Christ. I have suggested, on the contrary, that the story of the Grail, in the form that we have it, originates with Chrétien de Troyes late in the twelfth century, and more than fifty years after the painting in Taüll. We have seen, furthermore, that the earliest versions of the Grail romances do not associate the Grail with either a chalice or with the blood of Christ, and that such a connection is first found in the story told by Robert de Boron, early in the thirteenth century. Any interpretation of the meaning of the Virgin and the grail as painted by the Master of St. Clement in 1123 that relies on stories that would not be written for another seventy or eighty years must surely be suspect.

We would be more faithful to the historical evidence if we began with the assumption that the Master of St. Clement is not alluding to any preexisting story of the Grail, for the very good reason that such stories did not yet exist, in Spain or elsewhere.¹⁹ This assumption is

in keeping with the state of the literary evidence described earlier in this study, and it allows us to look at the painted image in Taüll unencumbered by knowledge and expectations of what was to become of the Grail in later decades.

It will be remembered that the word “graal,” referring to a shallow platter or bowl, was not common in Europe when Chrétien de Troyes made it the central image of his Arthurian romance during the last decades of the twelfth century. It was such an unusual word that Wolfram von Eschenbach, while retaining the name, “grâl,” could imagine that it designated not a serving bowl or platter but a precious stone. Before Chrétien, the word “grail” was neither famous nor evocative; it was simply a word, used especially in Catalonia and surrounding regions, to designate a piece of common table furnishing. The question that begs for an answer is how a piece of ordinary tableware became, in the course of the twelfth century, an object fit to be transformed into one of the most powerful literary images and cult objects of all time? The role of the poets, and especially of Chrétien de Troyes, in this transformation has been discussed above, and we will return to it in the final chapter. Now it is time to investigate the grail as painted in Taüll by the Master of St. Clement. If it is not yet the Holy Grail of Arthurian romance, what kind of grail is it? What is this enigmatic and radiant vessel intended to signify in the hand of the Virgin? And what might it mean to the medieval people who saw it?

The Master of St. Clement was an outstanding visual artist. Like his colleagues in the profession, he was able, through the creative use of color, form, and design, to give new life to old and familiar themes. His task was not to create new meaning, or to invent new stories, but to present old stories to the viewer in meaningful and appealing ways. If we consider only the content of his images, we would be justified in calling him a “traditional” artist; there is nothing new or innovative in the themes that he represents. The figure of

Christ in Majesty, surrounded by the four animals and the symbols of the Evangelists, as we have seen, is one of the most common images in all of Romanesque art. It is a multivalent image, calling to mind not only St. John's vision, in the Apocalypse, of the heavenly throne of God, but also the whole range of teachings that are at the core of the Christian faith.

In the majestic figure of Christ enthroned in heaven one recognizes both divine creator of the heavens and the earth and the man who was crucified in Jerusalem on Good Friday while his mother and John stood by in anguish at the foot of the cross, who was buried, and who then arose from the dead on Easter Sunday. This same figure represents the Christ who ascended into heaven forty days later while angels appeared and told his followers that this same Jesus would come again from heaven in the same way as he had left (Acts 1:11). The second coming of Jesus, when he will come again on clouds of glory at the end of time to judge the living and the dead, and when the twelve Apostles will sit on thrones to assist in the Last Judgment (Matt. 19:28), is also brought ineluctably to mind by the image of Christ in Majesty in the church of St. Clement.

Another scene from the life of Christ and the early history of the Church is implicit in the Romanesque depictions of Christ in Majesty. Ten days after the Ascension, on the feast of Pentecost (meaning "the fiftieth day," i.e., fifty days after the Jewish Passover, and also fifty days after Christ's resurrection), Jesus' followers were again gathered together in the upper room, where they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4). On that day, the Apostle Peter preached to the crowds: "God raised this Jesus up from the dead, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear" (Acts 2:32-33). It is perhaps this scene of Pentecost that is most clearly evoked by the apse paintings of St. Clement. The artist shows the crucified Christ

enthroned in heaven under the right hand of his Father. On earth, Mary and the Apostles are gathered together under an elegant portico. They are filled with the light of the Holy Spirit that streams through the central window of the apse. This “Apostolic College” of the new Church, with Mary at its head, will go forth to carry on God’s work not only in Jerusalem, Judea, and Galilee, but throughout the whole world (Acts 1:8).

If this is the context in which we should interpret the apse painting of St. Clement in Taüll, what then does the Master of St. Clement wish to convey by depicting Mary with the peculiar attribute of a radiant dish or platter? How would his contemporaries who saw and admired the image have understood it? There can, of course, be no definitive answer to either of these questions, as we are unable to see inside the mind of either the artist or the audience. But, within the context of the traditional meanings ascribed to such scenes, a range of possibilities suggest themselves.

Mary is portrayed here as first among equals (*prima inter pares*) in the Apostolic College. Standing on the right hand of Christ and immediately beside the central window, she plays a preeminent role in the scene. The Apostles on her left and right are shown in traditional fashion. They hold books in their covered hands, designating, it would seem, the office of preaching and teaching that they began to exercise under the influence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. But when the Master of St. Clement comes to depict the Virgin Mary, he invented a new image, a radiant grail, to convey to the viewer her particular role among the Apostles in the Church. Like the books held by the Apostles, the grail evokes a range of meanings and associations. Although the image was new and unfamiliar in Christian art, it would have been understood by its viewers in terms of what they already knew (whether much or little) about the scene depicted here.

One might easily associate the radiance of the grail with the

“tongues as of fire” that descended upon Mary and the Apostles in the upper room at Pentecost: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they [i.e., the Apostles and Mary, along with other male and female disciples, cf. Acts 1:14] were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:1–4).

This story was well known, along with the explanation of the events given by St. Peter, that Christ in majesty “has poured out this which you see and hear” (Acts 2:32–33). One may well imagine that the Master of St. Clement has concentrated these events into the image of a simple bowl, held by the Virgin, into which the Holy Spirit was poured by the ascended Christ, and from which emerged the tongues like fire that filled the room and enabled the Apostles to preach the Gospel.

Such an interpretation of the paintings is derived from the biblical history itself. More sophisticated readings are also possible, and are commonly found in medieval literature and art. In the liturgy of the Church and in the homilies of the fathers read on various feast days, one finds spiritual interpretations of the historical events that add depth and meaning to their understanding. One can imagine, for example, a preacher standing before the apse painting in St. Clement and declaiming a homily of Pope Leo the Great (440–461) for the feast of the Ascension. In such a context, Leo’s homily would lend specific meaning to the painted images on the wall of the apse, while they, in turn, would add life and color to the abstract words of the preacher.

At Easter [Leo begins], it was the Lord’s resurrection which was the cause of our joy; our present rejoicing is on account of his ascension into heaven. With all due solemnity we are commem-

orating that day on which our poor human nature was carried up, in Christ, above all the hosts of heaven, above all the ranks of angels, beyond the highest heavenly powers to the very throne of God the Father. It is upon this ordered structure of divine acts that we have been firmly established, so that the grace of God may show itself still more marvelous when, in spite of the withdrawal from men's sight of everything that is rightly felt to command their reverence, faith does not fail, hope is not shaken, charity does not grow cold.

For such is the power of great minds, such the light of truly believing souls, that they put unhesitating faith in what is not seen with the bodily eye; they fix their desires on what is beyond sight. Such fidelity could never be born in our hearts, nor could anyone be justified by faith, if our salvation lay only in what was visible.

And so our Redeemer's visible presence has passed into the sacraments. Our faith is nobler and stronger because sight has been replaced by a doctrine whose authority is accepted by believing hearts, enlightened from on high. This faith was increased by the Lord's ascension and strengthened by the gift of the Spirit; it would remain unshaken by fetters and imprisonment, exile and hunger, fire and ravening beasts, and the most refined tortures ever devised by brutal persecutors. Throughout the world women no less than men, tender girls as well as boys, have given their life's blood in the struggle for this faith. It is a faith that has driven out devils, healed the sick and raised the dead.

Even the blessed Apostles, though they had been strengthened by so many miracles and instructed by so much teaching, took fright at the cruel suffering of the Lord's passion and could not accept his resurrection without hesitation. Yet they made such progress through his ascension that they now found joy in what had terrified them before. They were able to fix their minds on Christ's divinity as he sat at the right hand of his Father, since what was presented to their bodily eyes no longer hindered them from turning all their attention to the realization that he had not left his Father when he came down to earth, nor had he abandoned his disciples when he ascended into heaven.²⁰

This homily, like the apse painting, expresses both the deep mystery and the common understanding of the Church. When Christ

ascended into heaven he ceased to be physically present among the Apostles. But rather than leaving them bereft and abandoned, he became indescribably more present to them, and to the whole Church, in his divinity than he had been able to be in his humanity. After his ascension he was able to be present throughout the whole world and for all time through his gifts to the Church, namely the Holy Spirit and the sacraments. In the apse of St. Clement we should perhaps see a representation of this mystery. Christ in majesty is the ascending (or the ascended) Christ, but his representation here illustrates also his continuing presence on earth. He has given to the Apostles, beneath, and to their successors—including the Bishop of Roda and the clergy of his church—the gift of his Spirit to support them in their work. Christ's depiction immediately over the altar reminds those present that he is especially present in the Church's sacraments. And Mary, at the head of the apostolic college, holds a flaming bowl that can be seen as a condensed, artistic representation of the gift of the various sacraments to Mary, and thus to the Church universal.

It is possible, for example, to see in the grail held by the Taüll Virgin an allusion to one of the chief sacraments of the Church, the blood of Christ in the Eucharist. As we have seen above, the figure of Christ in Majesty might call to mind not only the ascended and glorified Christ, but also the crucified Christ who displays his wounds at his second coming. One can imagine, looking at the painting in the apse of St. Clement, that Mary and John are standing at the foot of the cross, as they are depicted in countless medieval representations, and that blood flowing from Christ's wounds has been collected in the vessel held by the Virgin below.²¹ This impression is heightened by the distinctive red color of the vessel's contents and by the red rays that are emitted. On these grounds it is plausible to say that the Master of St. Clement has represented Mary holding a

vessel of Christ's saving blood as a symbol of Christ's continuing presence in the Church's sacraments.

But if the artist wished to portray, in condensed form, the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the sacraments that Christ gave to the Church after his ascension, it may not have been Christ's blood in the Eucharist that would have come first to his mind. Although the Eucharist was to become the central sacrament in Christian thought and popular devotion during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we need not assume that such was already the case early in the twelfth century. It is worth considering what other sacramental images the Master of St. Clement may have had in mind when painting the Virgin and her grail.

One such possibility is that the gift given to Mary, and thus to the Church, by the ascended Christ is a vessel containing the holy oil or chrism by means of which the grace of the Holy Spirit was imparted to sacred persons, things, and actions in the Church's sacraments. From a very early date, "chrism" was considered one of the fundamental Christian sacraments, along with baptism and the eucharist. St. Isidore, the seventh-century bishop of Seville, wrote: "The sacraments are baptism, chrism, body and blood," and his description was well known in the twelfth century and beyond.²² Isidore goes on to explain that chrism is the visible sign of the Holy Spirit and of the spiritual gift of grace in the Church.²³ Closer to the time of Bishop Raymund of Roda and the Master of St. Clement, Pope Innocent II (1130–1143) mentions chrism and holy oils first among the sacraments of the Church that his contemporaries might be tempted to buy and sell, thus committing the crime of simony: "If anyone . . . should acquire any of the church's sacraments, namely chrism, holy oil, consecrations of altars or churches, through execrable avarice and the payment of money, let [them] be struck down."²⁴

No doubt the Master of St. Clement, like his contemporaries,

had experienced firsthand the impressive rite of the consecration of the oils celebrated with great pageantry each year by the bishop in his cathedral church (see Chapter 5). He also would have been familiar with the elaborate and popular ceremonies of church dedication, so central to the social life of communities and to the theological and canonical deliberations of the early twelfth-century schools.²⁵ As we have seen, holy oil and chrism are prominent in the rite of church dedication. Not only the walls of the church and the altar, but also the paten and chalice of the mass and the crucifix, are consecrated by means of these holy oils. Through them the grace of the Holy Spirit is imparted to the church, to its ministers, and to the people who congregate there.

With this in mind, we might imagine that the reddish-orange color of the contents of the Virgin's grail represents the pure olive oil of the Church's chrism and holy oils. The flames or radiance emanating from the grail evoke both the sanctity and fragrance of the oil and the "tongues as of fire" of the Holy Spirit given to the Church at Pentecost. It is fitting, too, that this vessel should be placed in the hands of Mary, who was addressed by the angel Gabriel at the Annunciation as "gratia plena" ("full of grace"; Luke 1:28). To her, especially, belongs a symbol representing the grace of the Holy Spirit poured out for the Church.

None of these interpretations, of course, is certain, and other possibilities will be considered in due course. However, identifying the sources of the artist's inspiration and imagery is not crucial for the argument of this book, which is simply that the Master of St. Clement painted something unusual and remarkable in this depiction of the Virgin holding a radiant grail, and that those who viewed the painting would be guided by no long-standing artistic tradition to help them interpret its meaning. The grace of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; the sacraments of oil, chrism and consecration; the blood of Christ in the Eucharist; each and all of these meanings, and others

too, might be represented by the elegantly simple image of the Virgin and the grail among the Apostles at Taüll.

That the artist had indeed created something new and notable in his painting of the Virgin is suggested by one other startling discovery made by explorers of the Association of Museums of Barcelona in 1907. Behind the altar in the church of Santa Maria in Taüll, some five hundred yards beyond the church of St. Clement, they found a group of six wooden figures, carved during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.²⁶ The largest of these is a life-size standing image of the Virgin that would seem to be a direct copy, in wood, of the painted figure of the Virgin and the Grail in the church of St. Clement (Fig. 6). If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, then the sculptor of this image would seem to be paying a special tribute to the artist who painted the Virgin with a grail, or vice versa.

In 1925 this statue was acquired by Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, and it is conserved and displayed there to this day. By chance, the foremost expert on Romanesque sculpture in his day, Arthur Kingsley Porter, was an adviser to the Fogg museum when the statue was purchased from an art dealer in Pittsburgh. Porter, in the first published study of the statue, comments: "I can still call clearly to mind my surprise at first seeing the new sculpture. Here is stylization carried possibly to greater extremes than in any other plastic work I recollect. The exaggeration is almost incredible. Yet for all its strangeness, the effect is not bizarre; the beauty of the line, the rhythm of the composition, produce on the contrary an impression of solemnity. . . . The Tahull frescoes, I remember, came at once vividly to mind."²⁷ Only later did Porter learn that the statue had, in fact, been discovered in that very same village of Taüll (Tahull).

All subsequent scholars have commented on the striking similarities of form and gesture between the carved image and the apse painting of the Virgin at Taüll. The similarities might have been even more striking if the original polychromy of the sculpture had sur-

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Fig. 6 Virgin Mary. Found in 1907 behind the main altar of Santa Maria of Taüll. Wooden sculpture with traces of gesso and polychrome. Early twelfth century. Courtesy of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Friends of the Fogg Art Museum Fund.

vived, and, of course, if the left hand of the statue had not been broken or cut away at sometime in its history. In all of the literature on this masterpiece of Romanesque sculpture, however, no one seems yet to have suggested that one of these two images, found in the same village and perhaps originally in the same church, is a copy or a representation of the other. Such a hypothesis has much to recommend it. It would explain the otherwise-unparalleled gestures of the sculpted Virgin, with her right hand raised, palm outward, and her left hand (now cut away) held close to her body.²⁸ If the hypothesis is correct, she would once have held in her left hand a vessel, a wooden grail, like the one portrayed on the apse painting of the church of St. Clement. Whether the Master of St. Clement should be imagined to have copied the wooden statue, or the sculptor to have imitated the master's painting, we cannot say, but that these two works of art, one in fresco and the other in wood, are closely related is beyond doubt (Fig. 7).

Art historians have been unable to agree on the original meaning or function of the wooden Virgin. It has been variously interpreted as a part of a "deposition group" (Mary, John, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea taking Jesus down from the cross), an "annunciation group" (Mary and the Archangel Gabriel), a "visitation group" (Mary and her cousin Elizabeth), and a "crucifixion group" (Mary and John beside the crucified Jesus).²⁹ All of these are plausible suggestions and examples can be found in sculpture and paintings in other churches in this region and period, but no companion pieces to this exquisite statue have been identified.³⁰ After a careful review of the scholarship, Janice Mann has concluded: "The original context and role of [this statue] remain a mystery."³¹ Another possibility, as I have suggested above, is that the wooden figure is intended to represent the same image as is found in the painting by the Master of St. Clement: the Virgin Mary, gesturing toward the viewer with her open right hand, and in her left hand holding some kind of

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Fig. 7 The Fogg Virgin (left; cf. Fig. 6) and the Virgin of St. Clement (right; cf. Pl. 6)

carved wooden bowl or platter or grail. If so, one might even imagine that at some time the wooden bowl had been cut or broken away from the arm of this sacred statue, decorated with gold and jewels, and called, with some justification, a “holy grail.”

We have, then, in the little Pyrenean village of Taüll, one, or possibly two, images of the Virgin holding in her hand a sacred vessel that can be called a “grail.” Just such a vessel will be made famous by Chrétien de Troyes some fifty years later, in the north of France, when he tells the story of a radiant serving dish that is borne by a maiden and called a Grail. Chrétien says very little in his *Conte du graal* about the meaning of this Grail. He calls it “a very holy thing,” and tells us that it holds, not “a pike, lamprey, or salmon,” but a single eucharistic host. In subsequent years poets, storytellers, and scholars filled this

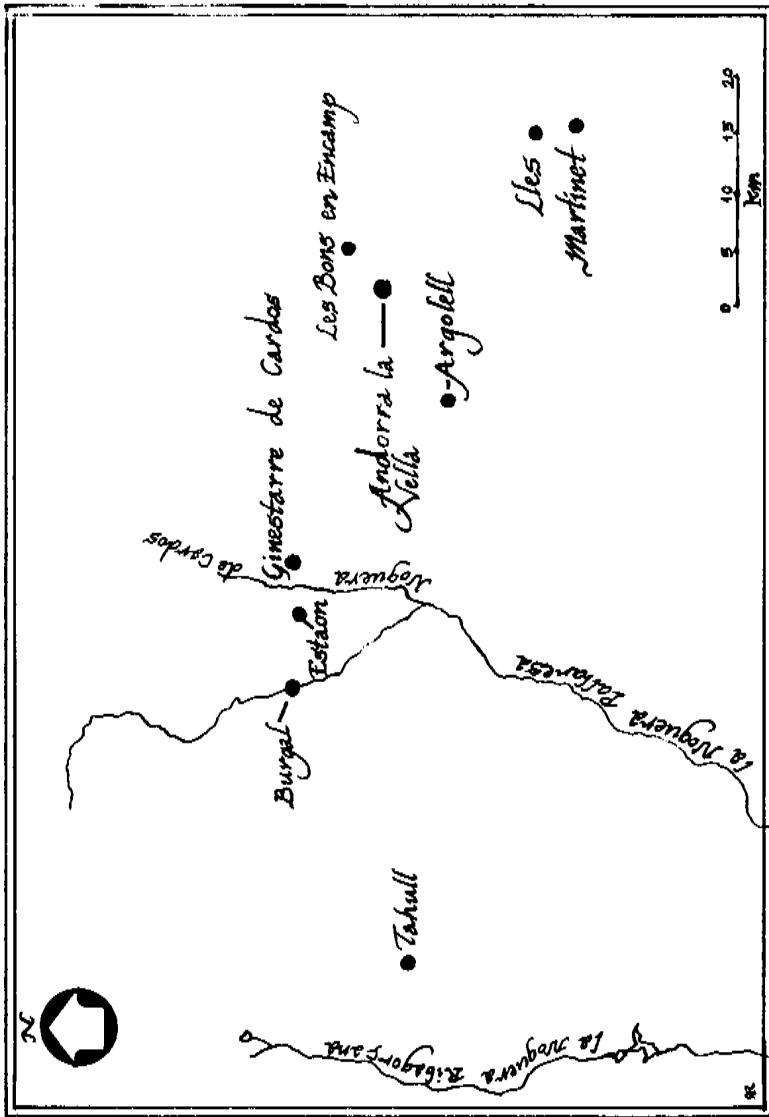
vessel with new meaning, and it became the object of one of the greatest quests in history. If we are right, the earliest origins of this mysterious Grail are to be sought in the Christian art of the high Pyrenees. It was there, apparently, that a piece of common tableware was first transformed in art into a sacred vessel in the hands of the Virgin, and from there, in ways that will be explored below, it came to the attention of the poets and storytellers.

CHAPTER 7

The Virgin and the Grail in the Pyrenees

Half a century before Chrétien de Troyes wrote the first surviving story of the Grail, the Master of St. Clement painted an image of the Virgin Mary holding a mysteriously radiant platter or shallow bowl—a “grail”—in her covered hand. The artist, we can be sure, had no idea that his simple dish would subsequently become one of the most famous objects in history. He sought simply to portray the Virgin with a suitable symbol that would mark her special place among Christ and the Apostles. But what does the grail represent in these paintings? If it is not yet the Holy Grail of the romances, or a relic of the Last Supper and of Christ’s crucifixion preserved by Joseph of Arimathea, what is it that was to be symbolized by a vessel in the hands of the Virgin? We explored some possible connotations of this previously unknown symbol in the last chapter, but we have not yet exhausted the evidence that might shed light on its original meaning.

In at least eight other Pyrenean churches, and nowhere else in Christendom, the Virgin is depicted as holding some sort of unidentified vessel, variously interpreted as a lamp, a cup, or a chalice. The paintings all date from the same period (ca. 1100–1170), and come from a small area of the Pyrenees, stretching from the old boundary between Aragon and Catalonia in the west to the principality of Andorra in the east (map 2). The area in which they are found



Map 2. Ribagorça, Pallars, Urgell, and Andorra (showing places mentioned in Chapters 5-7) (Randall Rosenfeld).

measures only about seventy-five kilometers from east to west, and some thirty kilometers from north to south. The only large town in this region is the episcopal seat of Urgell (La Seu d'Urgell) in its southeastern corner. The area is well removed from the busy pilgrim routes across the Pyrenees to St. James of Compostella in the west, and from the coastal roads connecting Narbonne and Arles in southern France with the religious centers of Ripoll and Vic or the commercial centers of Girona and Barcelona in the east. Just to the north of this region are the highest peaks of the Pyrenees. Beyond these peaks lie the headwaters of the Garonne, flowing north to Toulouse, and the Ariège, flowing through the county of Foix, but one does not pass easily here into those parts of southern France.

Although this region is remote and rugged, it is not isolated. On the basis of the artistic evidence alone one sees an intimate familiarity with developments in the rest of Europe. The Romanesque style and the iconographic programs of these churches in the high Pyrenees are in the mainstream of developments not only elsewhere in Spain, but also in France, Italy, Germany, and even further afield. In one detail, however, they are idiosyncratic, that is in their representation of the Virgin Mary holding a sacred vessel.

The meaning of this unusual symbol of the Virgin is nowhere made clear in the paintings. There are no inscriptions to explain it, nor any traditions, whether artistic or literary, that offer clear and unambiguous guides to its interpretation. Almost all that we have is the evidence of the images themselves.

These paintings all have certain elements in common with the art of twelfth-century Europe. They all are dominated, for example, by an image of "Christ in Majesty," seated on a throne inscribed within a mandorla, and surrounded by various members of the heavenly court. This is perhaps the most common motif for apse decoration in Romanesque art.¹ These paintings are somewhat unusual in that all but one of them fill the space beneath the Majesty

with a row of Apostles. This motif is not unknown in Christian art, but nowhere else does it figure as consistently and as prominently as in these Pyrenean paintings. Even more unusual, in our paintings, is the inclusion of the Virgin Mary as one of the central figures in the row of Apostles. There are examples elsewhere, in Spain and abroad, of this arrangement, but the favor that it finds among the painters and patrons in this small section of the Pyrenees is remarkable. Finally, our paintings are unique in Christian art and iconography in identifying the Virgin not only by means of a painted inscription naming her, but also by the sacred vessel that she holds in her covered hand.

The Master of St. Clement may have been well versed in the style and the conventions of Romanesque art in Italy, France, and Spain. But when he depicted at Taüll the Apostles with the Virgin in their midst holding a dish or grail, he was apparently speaking (or creating) a symbolic language unique to this local region. Looking closely at the paintings from the neighboring churches may help us better to understand the original meaning of this enigmatic vessel.

St. Peter (S. Pere) of Burgal

Perhaps the earliest depiction of the Virgin holding a sacred vessel (although not a “grail”) comes from the monastery of St. Peter in El Burgal, on a rocky promontory some forty kilometers northwest of Seu d’Urgell. The church, now in ruins, once served a double monastery of men and women living according to the rule and customs of St. Benedict. A large portion of the main apse decoration of the church was rediscovered in the 1920s and was removed to Barcelona, where it is now on display in the Romanesque gallery of the National Museum of the Art of Catalonia.² On the wall of the apse, beneath a figure of Christ in Majesty and above the level of the altar, are life-size depictions of six figures seated on a long bench. The four who

surround the central window are, from left to right, St. Peter with the keys, the Virgin Mary with a radiant vessel, St. John the Baptist with the Lamb of God, and St. Paul holding a book. Two other unidentifiable Apostles flank these figures on left and right.

Each figure was originally identified by an inscription, but only the names “Iohannes” [Baptista] and “Paulus” are legible now. Beneath these figures is a portrait of a female donor offering a large wax candle to the church. Recent scholarship has tended to identify this figure with a countess who died in 1090; older scholarship was less certain, and was willing to date the ensemble anytime between 1100 and 1200. Although the question remains unsettled, a date in the late eleventh or early twelfth century would seem most likely.³

Mary is seated beside the central window, with St. Peter on her right (Fig. 8). Her left hand is covered with a portion of her mantel, and she holds a large and unusually shaped vessel emitting reddish-orange rays. Some scholars have unhesitatingly associated this vessel with the Holy Grail containing the blood of Christ.⁴ Others have been more reticent, describing it simply as a vase, a chalice, or a lamp.⁵ Those who would see here the Holy Grail as it is described by Chrétien, Wolfram, and Robert de Boron are surely guilty of anachronism. For Chrétien, the Grail is a dish or platter, for Wolfram a stone, and only with Robert de Boron, writing perhaps a full century after the artist executed this painting, does it become a receptacle for the blood of Christ. Whatever the artist of El Burgal meant to represent by this vessel, he can scarcely have been influenced by these later stories, nor can we use them to explain and interpret the mute image. Furthermore, if we are right in thinking that the Catalan word “grail” originally designated a shallow dish or platter, then we can hardly conclude that the artist has represented here the Virgin holding something that he and his countrymen would have recognized as a “grail.”

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Fig. 8 St. Peter (with keys) and St. Mary (with radiant vessel). Detail from the main apse of St. Peter of El Burgal. Fresco. Early twelfth century. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

In truth, however, it is very difficult to say with any certainty what this strange vessel might represent. Its large and perfectly globular body, narrow neck, wide mouth, and pyramidal base are unlike other vases, chalices, or lamps in the art or archaeology of the region. Scholars have suggested possible analogues in the hanging lamps depicted in frescoes of the lower church of San Clemente in Rome (ca. 1100),⁶ and in the odd vessel (a lamp?) held by St. Noemelia in a fresco in the crypt of the cathedral at Anagni (central Italy, ca. 1100), but none of these is very similar to the vessel held by the Virgin of Burgal.⁷ Betty Al-Hamdan has argued most strongly that the Virgin of El Burgal is holding a burning lamp, and has shown persuasively that a lamp could have been understood in the Middle Ages as a fitting symbol for the Virgin. But she acknowledges that, if it is so, such an image of Mary with a burning lamp is found nowhere else in Christian art outside of this small region of the Pyrenees.⁸

If it is, indeed, a burning lamp that the Virgin is holding in the fresco of El Burgal, it is a highly stylized image, and one that might well have given rise to various interpretations among those who viewed it. If the Master of St. Clement (see Chapter 6), for example, was influenced by this image and wished to imitate it, he has certainly taken liberties, transforming the lamp(?) of El Burgal into a radiant platter or “grail.” Other Catalan artists, as we shall see, will take similar liberties in their own renditions of the mysterious vessel held by the Virgin.

Santa Eulàlia of Estaon

Just outside the village of Estaon, only a few kilometers southeast of El Burgal as the crow flies, but more than twenty-five kilometers by modern road, is the tiny parish church of Santa Eulàlia. The church was decorated with a remarkable series of Romanesque frescoes

sometime during the first half of the twelfth century. The paintings from the apse were removed in the 1920s and are now on display in the Romanesque gallery of Barcelona's National Museum of the Art of Catalonia.⁹

While the depiction of Christ in Majesty is similar to that in other Catalan examples of this theme, the figures who fill the wall of the apse beneath are unusual. Instead of a row of Apostles, we find a series of women surrounding a scene of the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The female saints on our right are St. Anne (SANCTA AN ...) and St. Lucy (SANCTA LUCIA) (Fig. 9). Their left hands are covered by their mantels and each holds a fiery vessel (a lamp? a chalice?) that somewhat resembles the enigmatic vessel held by the Virgin of Burgal. To our left is the scene of Christ's baptism, and further left are the figures of St. Eulalia (SANCTA EULALIA) and the Virgin Mary (SANCTA MARIA) (Fig. 10). St. Eulalia, the church's patron, wears a crown, and holds her open hands toward the viewer. The Virgin Mary stands between Eulalia and the angel of the baptism, holding in her covered left hand the conical base of a shallow vessel emitting wavy red lines of radiance.

This is the third example of the Virgin holding a radiant vessel to be found in a remote Pyrenean village early in the twelfth century. None of the three vessels (at Taüll, El Burgal and here at Estaon) resembles another in physical shape, but the three artists who created these images obviously shared a common conception, found nowhere else in the long tradition of Christian art, that the Virgin could properly be depicted with the attribute of a glowing or radiant vessel. What the vessel contained, and what it was meant to represent, remain mysterious, but that the Virgin's radiant vessel is distinct in shape from those of the female saints on her left may be thought to be significant.

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Fig. 9 St. Agnes(?) and St. Lucy. Detail from the apse of Santa Eulàlia of Estaon.
Fresco. Mid-twelfth century. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

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the print version of this title.]

Fig. 10 St. Eulalia and St. Mary. Detail from the apse of Santa Eulàlia of Estaon. Fresco. Mid-twelfth century. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

Santa Maria of Ginestarre

The convention of depicting the Virgin Mary holding a sacred vessel seems to have spread rapidly in this small region of the Pyrenees during the twelfth century, and evidence of it is found in other nearby churches. Some five kilometers further east from Estaon, in

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Fig. 11 Christ in Majesty, with Apostles and Mary. Santa Maria of Ginestarre, apse.
Fresco. Mid-twelfth century. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Fig. 12 St. Peter (with keys) and St. Mary (with cup). Detail from the apse of
Santa Maria of Ginestarre. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

the hamlet of Ginestarre, is a small parish church dedicated to St. Mary.¹⁰ Sometime probably in the middle of the century an artist decorated the church with a series of frescoes similar to those found in nearby churches.

In the semi-dome of the apse he depicted Christ in Majesty. On the wall beneath, he painted Mary among the Apostles (Fig. 11). St. Paul and St. Mary stand in the central location, on either side of the church's only window. Paul holds his right hand with the palm outward toward the viewer and in his left he holds a book. On Paul's left side is Bartholomew, whose image is lost but who is identified by an inscription. Andrew(?) is next to Paul, holding a cross, and another Apostle, perhaps St. James, holds a book. On Mary's right stand Peter holding the keys, John holding a book, and another unidentified Apostle, perhaps Philip, holding a scroll. Mary addresses the viewer with her open right hand, and holds a cup or chalice in her covered left hand (Fig. 12). The vessel that she holds is, once again, idiosyncratic in form. It has a narrow, conical base and a hemispherical body like many contemporary eucharistic chalices, but two handles are attached to the bottom of the hemisphere in a fashion that is not common for such vessels in either the art or the archaeological remains of the period. Although there are no radiant lines emerging from the vessel, its white color stands out against the dark background and gives the impression of luminescence.

Santa Eugenia of Argolell

Some twenty-five kilometers southeast of Ginestarre (but nearly eighty-five kilometers by the modern road to Seu d'Urgell and then north again, to the border of Andorra) lies the little village of Argolell and its parish church dedicated to Santa Eugenia. Only fragments of the Romanesque murals from this church have survived, but these are very revealing.¹¹ Figures of the Virgin and the Apostles again flank

a central window in the apse. On the left stands the Apostle Paul, holding a book open to the passage in the Acts of the Apostles (9:15) where the Lord says: "This man is to me a vessel of election" (*Vas electionis est mihi iste*). The artist has garbled the inscription somewhat, writing: **VAX ELICCIIONIS EST NIHI** (Fig. 13). Next to St. Paul is St. John the Evangelist, identified by an inscription and holding a scroll, and a third, unidentified Apostle. On the other side of the central window stand the Virgin and two Apostles whose identity can no longer be established. Mary has her head covered in the usual way and holds her right hand palm out toward the viewer (Fig. 14). In her covered left hand she holds the broad, pyramidal base of an exquisitely depicted vessel in the shape of a eucharistic chalice. The body of the chalice is inscribed with a cross, and is shown in three dimensions, so that the viewer can catch a glimpse of the inside of the cup. No rays emerge from the vessel. Here, it would seem, the artist has clearly intended to represent a eucharistic chalice.

Santa Coloma in Andorra

Only a few kilometers separate the village of Argolell from the medieval principality of Andorra. This tiny principality is divided into parishes whose churches, like the others described in this chapter, and like the churches of Taüll and the Boi valley after 1140, were under the jurisdiction of the bishop of Urgell.¹² The church dedicated to St. Columba in the Andorran parish of La Vella, some eighteen kilometers north of Seu d'Urgell, is one of the oldest and most beautiful in the principality. It seems also to be the first church to have been decorated by the artist who has come to be known as the Master of Santa Coloma, and who was probably responsible for the frescoes in at least four Andorran churches during the years 1150 to 1170.¹³

The rich ensemble of paintings that decorated the walls and

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the print version of this title.]

Fig. 13 St. Paul (with book). Detail from the apse of Santa Eugenia of Argolell. Fresco. Mid-twelfth century. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

[To view this image, refer to
the print version of this title.]

Fig. 14 St. Mary (with chalice). Detail from the apse of Santa Eugenia of Argolell. Fresco. Mid-twelfth century. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

vaulted ceiling of the sacristy of Santa Coloma were uncovered early in the twentieth century. Removed to Barcelona in the 1920s, they were acquired for the Colección Baron de Cassel, in Cannes (France). During World War II they were stolen by the Gestapo and taken to Germany where they are today preserved in Berlin's Skulpturen-

sammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst, a branch of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz.¹⁴ Until very recently these paintings could be studied only on the basis of black and white photographs made in the 1930s. In the summer of 2003, however, they were exhibited in Berlin, and we can describe them accurately for the first time. The Master of Santa Coloma conceived an elaborate plan for decorating every available space on the walls of the small sacristy (3m x 3m x 4m) behind the main altar of the church. A large figure of Christ in Majesty dominates the northern wall and the ceiling. Opposite are six haloed Apostles of equally imposing dimensions. The figures that interest us here are on the end or eastern wall of the sacristy and would have been visible through the central door leading from the body of the church. A central window dominates this back wall. Above it, in a multicolored medallion, is a white dove (*coloma*) representing the Holy Spirit. Four figures standing within a colonnade flank the window. On our far right is St. Paul, holding a book in his covered left hand. Next to him is St Peter, holding the keys in his right hand. On our far left is Santa Coloma, the church's patron (Fig. 15). Her left hand is covered and holds a tall and slender vase, narrow at the top, with flames emerging. In her right hand she holds a fiery torch or lamp.¹⁵ Next to her is the Virgin, who shares with Peter the place of honor beside the central window and under the dove of the Holy Spirit. Her right hand is raised, palm out toward the viewer, and in her covered left hand she holds the base of a chalice. Although the paint is damaged at the top of her chalice, no flames can be seen there, and it seems unlikely that any were intended.

St. Romanus (Sant Romà) of Les Bons in Encamp, Andorra

The church and the altar of St. Romanus, in the village of Les Bons, Encamp parish, were consecrated by Bishop Bernard Roger of Urgell

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Fig. 15 St. Columba (with burning lamp) and St. Mary (with vessel). Detail from the rear wall of the sanctuary of Santa Coloma in La Vella, Andorra. Fresco. Mid-twelfth century. Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY.

on 23 January 1164.¹⁶ The parchment document witnessing the consecration was found inside a small reliquary box (*lipsanoteca*) in the altar.¹⁷ The Master of Santa Coloma turned his hand to decorating its walls probably in the period just before its consecration. Only fragments of the original decoration have been preserved. These were removed to Barcelona's National Museum of the Art of Catalonia sometime between 1919 and 1923.¹⁸ The Apostles, accompanied by the Virgin, surround the central window of the apse. They are identified by inscriptions and by the objects that they hold. On our left is Andrew (fragmentary) followed by Mary (SANCTA MARIA), Peter with the keys (SANCTUS PETRUS), the central window, Paul with a scroll (SANCTUS PAULUS), and James (SANCTUS IAC . . .). The Virgin holds her right hand palm out toward the viewer, and in her left she holds the base of a cup or chalice (Fig. 16). The bowl of the vessel is somewhat shallower than that at Santa Coloma and has a longer stem. It appears luminescent against the dark background of the painting.

St. Christopher (Sant Cristòfol) of Anyós, in La Maçana, Andorra

The third example from Andorra featuring an image of the Virgin holding a sacred vessel is the little church of St. Christopher in the village of Anyós, La Maçana parish.¹⁹ During the 1930s some fragments of Romanesque mural paintings were discovered in the apse of St. Christopher's. They were removed, and acquired by an antiquary in Madrid who sold them to a private collector in the United States. After being displayed in the Brummer Gallery in New York in 1939 they disappeared. Recently they have come to light again in a private collection in Madrid.²⁰

The surviving fragment, attributed to the Master of Santa Coloma, shows three standing figures. On the left is a young man

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the print version of this title.]

Fig. 16 St. Mary (with cup or chalice) and St. Peter (with keys). Detail from the apse of St. Romanus (S. Romà) of Les Bons in Encamp, Andorra. Fresco. Mid-twelfth century. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya (Barcelona).

without a beard, perhaps St. John the Evangelist, who holds a book or a scroll in his covered left hand. On the right is a bearded figure who blesses the viewer with his right hand, just as does St. Peter in the frescoes from Les Bons. The figure in the centre is unmistakably the Virgin Mary (Fig. 17). She holds her right hand out toward the viewer, and in her covered left hand she holds the base of a bright chalice. The shape of the chalice is not identical to those depicted by the same artist in Santa Coloma and in Sant Romà—its bowl is slightly more conical here—but all three vessels easily call to mind a eucharistic chalice.

Lles (Martinet) in Cerdanya

The last, and most easterly, example in Romanesque art of the Virgin holding a sacred vessel is found on a painted altar frontal originally from a small church in the village of Lles, near Martinet, about ten kilometers east of Andorra.²¹ Altar frontals (*antependia*) from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries have survived in large numbers in the Iberian peninsula, and they represent some of the most striking and original works of art from the region.²² The frontal from Lles, now in the Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts, is no exception. On a wooden panel measuring about one and a half by one meter (57 by 37 inches) the anonymous artist has depicted the ascension of Christ. Across the middle of the panel he has written, in alternating red and white letters, the words of the angels to the Apostles at the ascension: VIRI GALEI QVID AMIRAMINI ASPICIENTES IN CELVM—HIC GESVS QVEMMAMODUM VIDISTIS EVM (“Men of Galilee, why do you stand in wonder, looking up into heaven? This Jesus [who was taken up from you into heaven will come] in the same way as you saw him [go into heaven]” Acts 1:11).

The composition of the scene is striking, and seems to reflect something of the arrangement of the mural paintings in the nearby

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Fig. 17 Mary (with a chalice). Detail from the apse of St. Christopher of Anyós, La Maçana, Andorra. Fresco. Mid-twelfth century. Barcelona Arxiu Mas, Institut Amatller d'Art Hispànic.

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Fig. 18 Christ in Majesty (above) with Apostles and Mary (below). Wooden altar frontal from Lles (Martinet) in Cerdanya. Mid-twelfth century. Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts.

churches (Fig. 18). The upper portion shows Christ in Majesty, surrounded by angels, as he is usually depicted in the semi-dome of the apse of the churches we have seen. The row of Apostles beneath corresponds to the so-called apostolic college depicted on the walls beneath the semidome in these same churches. Some scholars have found the style of the painting itself very reminiscent of the frescoes in the churches of Santa Maria of Ginestarre and St. Christopher of Anyós.²³

In the lower zone of the altar-frontal twelve Apostles are identified by inscriptions. They are depicted as beardless and bearded in alternation (St. Peter, for example, against all artistic convention, is beardless, and the young St. John the Evangelist is shown with a beard). The hair of the Apostles is painted red, green, and blue, in rotation. On our far left is Mathias (s. MATIAS), followed by Bartholomew (s. BARTOLOMEO), Peter (s. PETRVS) with the keys, Barnabas (s. BARNABE), Andrew (s. ANDRAS), and John (s. IOHANES),

whose name would not fit in the border above and is written instead beside the figure. The Virgin (s. MARIA) stands in the very center of the Apostles. On her left are Paul (s. PAVLVS), Thomas (s. TOMAS) holding a book inscribed "Deus," Matthew [s. MATEVS], Luke (s. LVCAS), James (s. IACOBVS), and Philip (s. FILIPVS).

In the center, directly beneath the ascending Christ, is St. Mary. Standing inside what appears to be a doorway, she holds her left hand palm out toward us, and in her uncovered right hand she holds the base of a large bowl or chalice (Fig. 19).

This scene on the altar frontal from Lles is the only one of the Pyrenean compositions we have considered where the event depicted is identified clearly and unambiguously by the artist. The Latin inscription across the middle of the frontal assures us that it is the ascension of Christ as described in the Acts of the Apostles that is being portrayed. Christ, enthroned in majesty, is surrounded by a heavenly host of angels. Two of the angels gesture toward Jesus and proclaim to the Apostles below the words that are recorded in the inscription: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand in wonder, looking up into heaven?" This is a literal representation of the scene as described in the Acts of the Apostles 1:6–11. But what about the Virgin? The Apostles are shown standing outdoors, on the Mount of the Ascension, but Mary seems to be standing indoors, at a doorway. Perhaps this should be seen as an allusion to the events that follow immediately in the Acts of the Apostles. After the ascension, the Apostles returned at once to the upper room in Jerusalem where they were staying. There, the book of Acts tells us, "together with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers," they devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 1:12–14). Ten days later, on the feast of Pentecost, they were again all together in the house where they were staying when the Holy Spirit descended on them in "tongues as of fire" (Acts 2:1–4). There they received the grace of the Holy Spirit, poured out by the same Jesus who had been raised up

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Fig. 19 Apostles and Mary. Detail of the wooden altar frontal from Lles (Martinet) in Cerdanya. Mid-twelfth century. Worcester Art Museum. Worcester, Massachusetts.

from the dead, exalted into heaven, and placed on a throne by his Father (Acts 2:24–36). It would seem that Mary is here shown within that upper room, receiving in her cup, or chalice, or bowl, the grace of the Holy Spirit that was poured out upon all of them on the day of Pentecost.

Might this rustic altar-panel provide a key to interpreting the meaning of all the other Catalan depictions of the Virgin with a

sacred vessel? Or is this simply another example of an artist trying to make sense of what is, in reality, a mysterious and ambiguous symbol? I am persuaded that the altar frontal of Lles does, indeed, hold the key, and that this humble painting reveals the entire scene of which the other apse paintings, often executed by more talented artists, preserve only the iconographic essentials (i.e., the Christ in Majesty, and a partial row of Apostles). A number of other explanations of these paintings, and of the Virgin with a sacred vessel, have been proposed, but none rests as firmly and as simply on the contemporary evidence as does this one. It confirms, moreover, the tentative interpretation offered above (Chapter 6) of the remarkable paintings of the Master of St. Clement in Taüll.

If we are correct, all of the Catalan paintings of the Christ in Majesty with the Apostles beneath and the Virgin bearing a sacred vessel are, ultimately, representations of the ascension and of Pentecost.²⁴ Seen in this light, they are a remarkably coherent group. In all of them the upper zone is dedicated to Christ in heaven, enthroned in glory and surrounded by a heavenly host. Directly beneath the ascended Christ in all of the apse paintings is a central window.²⁵ The window is a crucial part of the composition, and sometimes, as at St. Clement in Taüll, the building itself has been altered to emphasize this central feature.²⁶ The window should probably be seen also to suggest the illumination of the Holy Spirit, an interpretation that is emphasized at Santa Coloma in Andorra, where the dove, representing the Holy Spirit, is painted immediately above the window. The light of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Son after his Ascension into heaven, thus illuminates the Apostles and Mary at Pentecost, as described in the biblical account.²⁷

And what about the Virgin and her enigmatic vessel? If this interpretation is correct, the vessel should be seen to represent, in one way or another, the grace of the Holy Spirit poured out at

Pentecost. Since this grace is multivalent, so too is the Virgin's vessel; it might represent the Spirit's presence in the tongues of fire at Pentecost, or in the supernatural light of a lamp, or in the burning incense that fills the Church and purifies it. Because the grace of the Holy Spirit is manifested especially in the Church's tangible sacraments, the vessel might be thought to contain the holy water of baptism and of ritual cleansing, the holy chrism of consecration and confirmation, the holy oils of exorcism and of extreme unction, or the body or the blood of Christ in the Eucharist, to name only the most obvious possibilities. Just as Peter's keys are a multivalent image—representing at once the keys of the heavenly kingdom, the power of loosing and binding Christians by excommunication, and the power of forgiving sins in confession—so, too, can the Virgin's holy and radiant vessel be seen to represent any and all of the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the Church.

We may never know whose idea it was first to symbolize the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church by depicting the Virgin, among the Apostles, holding a sacred vessel. It may have been the Master of St. Clement, himself, or a patron or artist in one of these other churches. We can, however, say with some certainty that the idea originated in the high Pyrenees during the late eleventh or early twelfth century, and that it failed to spread, in this form, beyond the confines of the region.

But why should this striking image of the Virgin and the sacred vessel fail to spread? Perhaps it was the essential conservatism of the Romanesque artists that dissuaded them from adopting this new and untraditional representation. Or perhaps the image itself, the Virgin holding a cup or chalice, was too ambiguous. On the one hand, it failed to distinguish the Virgin Mary adequately from representations of other female saints with flaming cups or bowls, and on the other hand, it may have raised questions about the legitimacy of

a woman, even the Virgin Mary, bearing a eucharistic chalice. A third possibility, even more compelling to my mind, is that the image of this holy vessel did indeed spread, and very widely, but in a form that could easily lead to misunderstanding. When the vessel—the holy grail—was quite literally cut loose from the Virgin and stripped, as it were, from the bosom of the Church and the Apostles, it was free to become the Holy Grail of medieval courtly romance. As the sacred vessel came to be associated in song and story with Perceval (and Lancelot and Galahad) rather than with Peter and Paul and the Virgin Mary, it left the realm of sacred history and entered that of romantic fiction. The new Grail of romance might continue to represent the grace of the Holy Spirit and the highest goal of human desire,²⁸ but it also had the potential to stray far from this original meaning and to take on more fanciful (i.e., “romantic”) associations. If we are right, it may have been the very success of the popular Grail romances in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries that made artists and patrons of sacred art leery of imitating the Pyrenean masters. Not wishing to confuse sacred history with popular fiction, they chose not to portray in the hands of the Blessed Virgin a vessel that might be mistaken for the Holy Grail of the romances.²⁹ It is certain, in any case, that from the late twelfth century onward the Holy Grail entered the world of romantic fiction, and it is there, rather than in sacred art, that it has left its mark on history.

In a final chapter we will conclude this historical investigation into the roots and sources of the Holy Grail by attempting to bring the two worlds—the one of religious painting and the other of courtly romance—back into contact. If we are to hope to persuade anyone of our original premise—that the Holy Grail of Chrétien de Troyes’s tale originated, at least a half-century earlier, as an obscure and otherwise-unattested attribute of the Virgin Mary—it will be necessary to bridge the geographical, temporal, and cultural gap

between these two worlds. It may be beyond our powers to do so, but in this last chapter I will suggest one way that the enigmatic vessel of the Virgin could have been taken from the churches of the Pyrenees and transformed, during the twelfth century, into the Holy Grail of French romance.

Part III

The Historian's Quest

History is merely a list of surprises. It can only prepare us to be surprised yet again.

—KURT VONNEGUT, *Slapstick*

Parts One and Two of this study have suggested that there existed in the high Pyrenees, and nowhere else in Christendom, an artistic tradition of depicting the Virgin Mary holding something that could be called a holy “grail,” and that this Pyrenean grail is at least a half-century older than the first Grail romance, written by Chrétien de Troyes in the north of France during the 1180s. Might this unusual attribute of the Virgin in the Pyrenees somehow be at the root and origin of the later stories of the Holy Grail? None of the previous hypotheses about the sources of Chrétien’s Grail, whether in Celtic legend, in esoteric philosophy, in heterodox or orthodox religious rituals, or elsewhere, has found support in the historical record. But in these tiny churches we find clear artistic depictions of something that might be called a “grail” in the language of the region, and that is also endowed with many of the specific attributes of a grail as imagined by Chrétien de Troyes in his first telling of the story. Surely we are entitled to wonder if the one might have something to do with the other.

But can the evidence take us any further? Or will we be left entirely in the realm of speculation? Is there any reason to think that

an actual poet was moved by something in these religious pictures in a small mountain church to imagine an elaborate courtly narrative about knights and Fisher Kings and ladies and . . . a Holy Grail? The answer, for a historian, is mixed. On the one hand, it is impossible to prove that such a thing happened. The workings of the poetic and artistic imagination are hidden from our view, and unless the artists themselves tell us about their sources and inspiration we are, indeed, left only to speculate. On the other hand, the historian can perhaps demonstrate that such a thing could plausibly have happened, or at least that someone was in a position to see or learn about the unusual Pyrenean paintings and then to use this material in making up a romantic tale of this sort. It is this latter kind of limited demonstration that I have been searching for since I began the project.

I had supposed from the outset that if I was to connect the two parts of this study—the Romanesque paintings of the early twelfth century with the Grail romances of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries—I would somehow have to get Chrétien de Troyes south to these mountain villages, or get the grail to come north to Chrétien. I was hopeful that such evidence could be found, but this gaping hole in my argument resisted all attempts to fill it. As I worked out each chapter of the story, I continued to search for evidence that Chrétien, or one of his friends or patrons, could have seen or heard about the Pyrenean frescoes, but to no avail.

As a last resort I stopped investigating the poet, Chrétien, and began to ask instead about Perceval, the fictional hero of all the earliest Grail romances. Who was he? Where did he come from? Were there any clues in his name, or in his association with the grail, that might take us further? I was not very confident that this line of investigation would lead anywhere, but it was the only path left, so I followed it. The result took me quite by surprise.

CHAPTER 8

Perceval and the Grail

In the prologue of her novel *Solace for a Sinner*, the mystery writer Caroline Roe evokes a scene with which we are now familiar. She writes:

High in the Pyrenees, on the northwest edge of the kingdom of Aragon, the village of Taüll lay hidden from the world. The winding road that led up to it was steep and perilous; the meadows that fed its flocks were sparse and rocky. Hemmed in by towering mountain peaks, tumultuous rivers, and deep winter snows, Taüll had slumbered, protected from invasion as far back as the memory of men went. . . .

One of the oldest women in the village [the story is set in 1353] insisted that the painting of Our Lady holding the Grail that graces the wall behind the altar had been done when her grandfather was a boy, and that one day he had slipped into the church, seen the flames shooting up from the sacred vessel, and had run, terrified, as far up the mountain as his young legs would carry him. Her grandfather also claimed, she was fond of adding, that the artist who had been allowed to see the Grail to paint it had been struck blind as soon as his painting was finished. . . .

A jongleur traveled through once, and fashioned a spirited song about [the Grail], but it was generally reckoned to be too extravagant to be true, and the world took it for a poet's fancy.¹

It is this “jongleur” (juggler, entertainer, singer of tales) of Caroline Roe's imagination, and the story that he might have told, not only

about the Grail but also about Perceval, the original Grail hero, that will hold our attention in this chapter.

As we saw above, Chrétien de Troyes, writing in the north of France late in the twelfth century, created the first Grail romance that has survived. His *Conte du graal* was an immediate popular success, and every story of the Grail that has been told subsequently is indebted in some way or another to Chrétien's subtle and moving tale of the young Perceval and his adventures with this mysterious vessel. Is it possible that Chrétien himself should be cast in the role of a "jongleur" who once visited Taüll and came away with the idea for his Grail romance? The notion is attractive. It was in the day's of Chrétien's youth, in the early part of the twelfth century, that poetry written in the vernacular was flourishing as never before in the the sister languages of Occitan and Catalan, on both sides of the Pyrenees. Chrétien, like almost every poet of his time, was deeply impressed by the songs and stories of the southern troubadours.² But there is no evidence, either in his writings or in the historical record, that Chrétien ever traveled to the south, or found himself near to the Pyrenean churches with their depictions of a holy vessel.³

There were many other jongleurs and troubadours inventing songs and stories in these years. Could one of them have ventured to Taüll and been impressed by the enigmatic Virgin and her grail? But here we quickly become lost in a maze of possibilities. There are far too many candidates to consider, and we have far too little information about most of them, to help us decide where to start. What the historian needs is a thread to pull on, or a clue to follow. Even the weakest thread or the most indistinct track may lead somewhere profitable. Having investigated in vain all of the more obvious paths between the grail paintings in the south and the grail romances in the north, I began to look for some less obvious hints or clues. Finally I turned, almost in desperation, to the hero of the earliest grail stories—the knight Perceval, and there I found what I was

looking for. By asking about this earliest companion of the grail we can, I believe, learn a great deal more about those who first imagined and wrote about this hero, and about the Holy Grail.

The first piece of evidence to be considered is rather insubstantial. It is possible (although this is still hotly debated by scholars) that a story of Perceval and the Grail was already known in the south of France (Occitania) at the time that Chrétien was writing. The Occitan poet Rigaut de Barbezieux begins a poem to his “Lady” by comparing himself to Perceval: “Just as Perceval, when he was alive, was lost in wonderment at the sight, so that he could never ask what purpose the lance and the Grail served, so I likewise, Best of Ladies, for I forget all when I gaze on you.”⁴ A scholarly debate has raged for years about the date of this poem, and about whether it was written before or after Chrétien’s *Conte du grail*. The weight of the evidence and arguments now seem slightly to favour the view that Rigaut’s lyric is the older, and thus that a story about Perceval and his failure to ask a question about a lance and a grail was known in the south of France already in the 1160s, before Chrétien composed his famous *Conte*.⁵

Whether or not this particular conclusion will stand the test of time, we still may ask where the idea for this character came from. Who is this Perceval? And how did he come to be associated so closely with a lance and a grail? Little scholarly work has been done on these questions. Research has tended to concentrate on the origins of the Grail, with little attention being given to the origins of the first Grail “hero,” Perceval. For the most part, scholars have been content to suggest a Welsh or Celtic derivation of the name, noting the relation of the French “Perceval” to the hero of the Welsh Romance “Peredur” (although the earliest manuscript of the Welsh story dates to the end of the thirteenth century and it almost certainly borrows the name from the French “Perceval” rather than the other way around).⁶ Alternatively, they have repeated the fanciful etymology offered by Wolfram von Eschenbach in the thirteenth

century, that the name means “pierce” [the valley], or “perce-le-val” in French.⁷

A quite different explanation was offered in 1992 by the respected Swiss scholar André de Mandach.⁸ Drawing attention to the widespread use of “code-names” in the literature of Spain and France in this period, he postulated that “Perceval” might be a nickname for a famous count of the Perche (1099–1144), Rotrou II.

At first glance, de Mandach’s thesis fails to inspire much confidence. His claim that the grail stories originated as a kind of disguised history of some of the ruling clans of Aragon, Navarre, Catalonia, Occitania, and Castile between 1120 and 1137 is audacious, to say the least. When he identifies many of the leading characters of the romances with historical men and women of the time, the reader can not help but feel that the evidence, interesting as it may be, is often being stretched beyond what it can bear.⁹ And when he speaks of a “secret code” (*Geheimcode*) and claims to have found on an old map the actual site of the grail-castle, and the very lake or pond of the Fisher King,¹⁰ the reader may wonder if he or she has not stumbled into a mystery novel by mistake. Twice during the early research for this book I had found it necessary to test carefully de Mandach’s evidence—once concerning his claim to have identified the famous and elusive Kyot, the Provençal poet whom Wolfram von Eschenbach names as his source, and again when de Mandach argues that the Holy Grail is the chalice now preserved in Valencia cathedral. In both cases, although de Mandach’s ideas and arguments are thoughtful, and not without a certain plausibility, he can be shown to have gone well beyond what the historical evidence warrants in drawing his conclusions.

It was, then, not with the highest of hopes that I took up de Mandach’s volumes once again, to examine his evidence for the identification of Perceval with Count Routrou of the Perche. One reviewer summarizes the argument this way:

De Mandach also identifies Rotrou II de Perche, the Count of Val de Perche or Conde de Valperche, with the figures Perceval and Parzival because similarities in the biographies exist, even though the direct connection is not quite certain. The argument becomes, however, even more fantastic (not in the negative sense of the word) because Routrou married Matilda, daughter of King Henry I of England, and thus became the brother-in-law of Robert, Count of Gloucester, who had commissioned copies of the *Historia Regum Britanniae* by Geoffrey of Monmouth. In him the author believes to have found the crucial middleman who connected the Aragonese/Catalonian family clan with the Arthurian legend. This is possible, though not fully demonstrable, nevertheless highly fascinating and worthy of further investigation.¹¹

I began my own “further investigation” reluctant to accept any strict identification of a fictional character (Perceval) with a historical person (Rotrou of the Perche). If I have been persuaded, at least tentatively, to do so it is on the basis of the information presented below. While many questions remain, and better ways of explaining or understanding the evidence may be found, I am happy for now to imagine that the historical exploits of Rotrou II, count of the Perche, may prove to be the kernel around which the fictional character of “Perceval,” and the holy lance and Holy Grail, grew. But, even if this should prove not to be the case, we have found, at the very least, in the count of the Perche what we originally set out to find, namely, a plausible way by which the paintings and artwork done in Catalonia in the 1120s could be brought into contact with the poets and storytellers of the north later in the twelfth century.

The Perche exists today not as a political or administrative unit, but as a cultural region of France, lying some 150 kilometers southwest of Paris, midway between the famous cathedral city of Chartres and the city of Alençon on the southern edge of Normandy. Known today primarily for the powerful Percheron horses that are bred there, the Perche is an upland region, heavily forested, and traversed by numerous valleys. No major centers of population distinguish the

region; Bellême in the north and Nogent-le-Rotrou in the south are its largest towns. Early references to the area, dating from the sixth to the ninth centuries, describe it as a nearly impenetrable forest where holy men could withdraw safely from the world. But the Perche was not an uninhabited wasteland. From Roman times, at least, men and women had exploited its woodlands and dotted its landscape with pastures and fields of grain.¹²

During the unsettled years of medieval history, between 1000 and 1100, the Rotrou family first makes its appearance in the historical record. Their property was originally concentrated around the town of Nogent-le-Rotrou. The castle they built there still dominates the town, and the ruins of the new church that they dedicated to St. Denis are still to be found in the valley below.¹³ The first head of the family known to us is Geoffrey I (fl. 1031), who associated himself closely with one of the most powerful magnates of the time, Count Odo of Blois, and carved out a sphere of influence that would become the county of the Perche. The establishment of this territory was not entirely a peaceful undertaking, and sometime after 1035 Geoffrey was killed by assassins as he left the cathedral at Chartres.¹⁴

Geoffrey's son, Rotrou I (count from 1040 to 1079), increased the family's influence in the French heartland.¹⁵ His son, Geoffrey II (count from 1079 to 1099), who as a young man had taken part with the Normans in the battle of Hastings in 1066, signaled the rising importance of the Perche and its counts, especially by his marriage to Beatrice (Beatrix) of Roucy. Beatrice was a descendant of the Carolingian and Capetian kings of France and of the first Saxon emperor, Henry I. Her youngest sister, Felicia, married King Sancho Ramirez of Aragon, and her brother, Ebbes, married the daughter of the famous Norman count Robert Guiscard. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries it was marriages, as much as warfare, that established power and strengthened alliances, and the counts of Perche were now related by blood or marriage to the most important

houses of Europe.¹⁶ The children of Geoffrey II and Beatrice would, in turn, make fortunate marriages and extend the family's influence even further. But it was their eldest son, Rotrou II, count of the Perche from 1099 to 1144, who would play the greatest role in solidifying the dynastic fortunes at the same time as he was capturing the imagination and admiration of storytellers and historians from Spain to England and from Normandy to the Holy Land.¹⁷

Rotrou II ("the Great") was probably not yet twenty years old when he set out with the Norman duke Robert Curthose on the first crusade. Leaving Normandy in September 1096, they crossed the Alps and spent the winter in southern Italy before embarking for Constantinople in 1097. Rotrou fought at the siege of Nicaea in that same year, where a chronicler described him as "an outstanding young man" (*iuvensis clarissimus*).¹⁸ From October 1097 through May 1098 he was among the crusaders who besieged the ancient and strategic city of Antioch on the Orontes. During this long siege the crusaders suffered greatly and morale plummeted. Many left the field and returned to their homes in Europe, including Count Stephen of Blois, a close neighbor to the Perche, who sailed home to his wife on 2 June 1098. That same night the city was betrayed into the crusaders' hands, and they entered it as conquerors, only to be besieged in turn inside the city walls. It was there in Antioch, still desperately short of food and supplies, that a miracle occurred. A Provençal peasant named Peter Bartholomew had a vision in which Christ and St. Andrew appeared to him and told him that the lance that had pierced Christ's side at the crucifixion was buried beneath the altar in the ancient church of St. Peter in Antioch. On 14 June, the leaders of the crusade undertook a search for the holy lance, and that evening it was discovered. The army was enormously heartened by this miraculous discovery, and on 28 June, carrying the lance into battle, they broke out of the city, defeated their besiegers, and resumed their journey to Jerusalem.¹⁹

Rotrou of the Perche commanded one of the divisions that broke out of Antioch on that day in late June 1098. Kathleen Thompson, in her recent history of the Perche and its counts, writes: "Rotrou himself may have considered his role in this engagement as the high point of his crusading career." She adds: "An indication that the incident had a special place in family tradition is given by the reference to it, made more than a century later, by Rotrou's grandson William," the bishop of Châlons-en-Champagne.²⁰ His exploits were also commemorated in the cycle of old French and Occitan poems set during the first Crusade, the most famous of which is the *Chanson d'Antioche*.²¹ Rotrou almost certainly accompanied the crusaders to Jerusalem, which fell to them in July 1099. He returned from the Holy Land in the company of Robert of Normandy in September 1100, only to find that his father, Count Geoffrey II, had died the previous year. Geoffrey was buried in the monastery at Nogent with the famous bishop Ivo of Chartres in attendance.²²

Shortly after his triumphant return from the crusade, Rotrou was entertained by King Henry I of England at Domfront, on the border of Normandy and Maine in France. There the king, "having learned of Rotrou's valour," gave him his daughter Matilda in marriage.²³ When, two years later, in 1106, Henry defeated his brother, Robert Curthose, at the battle of Tinchebri and took possession of the Duchy of Normandy, Rotrou found himself allied to another of the most powerful lords of Europe. And since Count Stephen of Blois had died in 1102, and his widow, the Countess Adela, King Henry's sister, had assumed power on behalf of her sons, Rotrou's relations with the neighboring county of Blois-Chartres were similarly strengthened.²⁴

But Rotrou's interests and involvements were not to cease there; he soon found another field on which to exercise his restless energies. Rotrou's first cousin (the son of his mother's sister) was the famous king of Aragon, Alfonso I ("The Battler," 1104–1134).²⁵ The

son of King Pedro I of Aragon and Felicia of Coucy, Alfonso was tireless in his attempts to expand and strengthen the kingdom that he had inherited. He and his family were not averse to inviting “foreigners” to help in this work. Alfonso’s father, Pedro, had himself invited the priest Raymund William from Toulouse to serve as bishop of Roda in 1104, against local wishes, and it was Alfonso who confirmed this invitation after his father’s death (see Chapter 5). Only a few years later, perhaps in 1108, Alfonso seems to have invited his cousin Rotrou to cross the Pyrenees and help him in one of his campaigns against the Muslims. Although Rotrou spent only a year in Aragon on this visit, returning to the Perche in 1109, he nevertheless had made contacts that he would renew and develop before many years had passed.²⁶

In November 1120 Rotrou’s wife (and daughter of the English king), the Countess Matilda, set out from Normandy to cross the channel. Matilda was traveling in the company of King Henry’s only legitimate son, William Aetheling. Rotrou may have been away at the time, on pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the company of Fulk of Anjou. On 25 November Matilda and William Aetheling boarded the ill-fated White Ship bound for England, and both drowned that day when the ship was wrecked off the coast at Barfleur. When Rotrou returned to the Perche after his wife’s tragic death, he founded a new monastery at La Trappe, perhaps to pray for the soul of his wife. He endowed the new foundation with relics he had brought back from his pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and the monastery began to flourish. By the seventeenth century the fame of these “Trappist” monks will have spread around the world.²⁷

Rotrou then turned his attention once again to Spain and to the adventures of his cousin, King Alfonso of Aragon. In 1118 Pope Gelasius II had granted a crusading indulgence to participants in the wars against the Muslims in Spain. Alfonso’s allies from both sides of the Pyrenees, including Gascons, Aquitainians, and Occitanians,

joined him in his attacks, and within a short time they had captured many of the main cities between the Ebro River and the foothills of the Pyrenees.²⁸ Rotrou and his men joined Alfonso probably in 1122, and by 1123 Alfonso had made Rotrou governor of one of the most important of the reconquered cities, Tudela, on the Ebro. Rotrou spent the next twelve years traveling indefatigably back and forth between the Spanish peninsula, his home in the Perche, and his estates in England. Only with Alfonso's death in 1134 would Rotrou return for good to the Perche and to his interests in the North.²⁹

In Spain, Rotrou gained quite a reputation. King Alfonso rewarded him generously in 1128 "for the service given and being given every day."³⁰ Spanish chroniclers sang his praises, and an area in the city of Zaragoza, the Calle de Conde de Alperche, still bears his name.³⁰ The title *Conde de Alperche* (Count of the Perche), in the Spanish and Catalan vernacular, deserves some notice. The prefix *al-* is from the Arabic and corresponds to the English definite article *the* and the French *le*—count of *the* Perche. It is not too great a stretch of the imagination to suppose that the Iberian form, *Alperche*, could have been transformed into something like *Valperche* or *Perche-val* when stories began to be told north of the Pyrenees, in the language of Occitania and Francia, about this redoubtable count. This last transformation is only a conjecture, without historical or philological evidence to support it, but it is an appealing one in light of the appearance of a certain "Perceval" who was associated with a lance and a grail in Occitan and French stories later in the twelfth century.

A connection between the count of the Perche ("Perceval") and the holy lance is easily found. Rotrou was, after all, present at Antioch when the holy lance of Longinus was discovered during the first crusade. But what about the Grail? Can Rotrou, the *conde de Alperche*, also be associated with a holy vessel? The Percheron count was in the right place and at the right time to learn about, and even to see with his own eyes, the unusual vessel held in the hand of the

Virgin in the new Pyrenean paintings of the period. Even better, he was on familiar terms with the bishop under whose supervision the finest, and perhaps the earliest, of these images was produced.

The earliest dated depiction of a sacred vessel that might be called a “grail” in the Catalan vernacular appears in the church of St. Clement, Taüll, consecrated by Bishop Raymund of Roda on 10 December 1123. This same Bishop Raymund was intimately involved with King Alfonso and his allies throughout the years of his pontificate, from 1104 until his death from wounds received while accompanying Alfonso on his daring incursion far to the South, into Andalusia, in 1126.³²

Not only did Bishop Raymund of Roda and Count Rotrou of the Perche fight together on behalf of King Alfonso, they also appear together frequently in royal charters from his reign—so frequently that one might suppose a real friendship had developed between the two. Of the fourteen published charters naming Rotrou between April 1123, when he first appears in the Aragonese records, and June 1126, when Bishop Raymund dies, Rotrou and Raymund appear together in eight.³³ The latest of the documents is dated June 1126, the month in which Raymund died, and suggests that Rotrou may have even been with Raymund on his deathbed.³⁴

The earliest charter mentioning Rotrou and Raymund of Roda together was written in Zaragoza in April 1123.³⁵ In the autumn of that year Bishop Raymund returned to Roda, and then set out to consecrate the two churches in Taüll (see Chapter 5). It is possible to imagine that Rotrou accompanied the bishop on this journey into the Pyrenees, and even was present with him at the imposing ceremonies of 10 and 11 December. Rotrou may have taken this opportunity to accompany the bishop as far as Taüll, and then to continue north, across the mountains, to spend the winter months in his homeland before returning to Spain the following summer. There are two gaps in the Spanish documents signed by Rotrou in these

years:³⁶ between June 1126 and February 1127, when we know that Rotrou traveled to England to marry his second wife, Hawise of Salisbury,³⁷ and an earlier one, between April 1123 and October 1124, when he may well have wished to make arrangements back in the Perche for an extended absence while he exercised authority in his new Spanish territories.³⁸

However that may be, it is clear that Rotrou had every opportunity in these years to hear about, and even to see for himself, the impressive work of the Master of St. Clement at Taüll, and to fall under the spell of the strange image of the Virgin and her enigmatic "Grail." In this way Rotrou, count of the Perche, would combine in himself three elements that we might look for in the archetype or model of a romantic hero named Perceval: a name (Perche-val), an association with the holy lance (of Antioch), and familiarity with the Holy Grail (of Taüll).³⁹ These were the salient elements of the story that the Occitan poet Rigaut de Barbezieux had heard when he wrote to his "noble lady," and of the story told by Chrétien de Troyes for his patron, Philip of Flanders. All the rest of the tale may have been embroidered, but these parts, at least, can plausibly be associated with Rotrou, the historical count of the Perche.

Rotrou continued his service to his cousin Alfonso I of Aragon until 1134 or 1135. He then returned to the Perche, where he cultivated once again his friendships and alliances with the powerful houses of the realm. He allied himself politically with Count Geoffrey of Anjou to the west, and with Theobald (Thibaut) of Blois to the east. He joined the other great lords of France in the king's entourage at Poitiers when Louis VII married Eleanor of Aquitaine in 1137. He continued his benefactions to the monastery of La Trappe, and was perhaps planning another pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Before he could do so, however, he died of wounds received while aiding the Angevins at the siege of Rouen, in Normandy, in 1144.⁴⁰

After his death, just at the time that courtly and romantic litera-

ture was coming into full flower in France under the patronage of the houses of Aquitaine, Blois, Champagne, and Anjou, the house of Perche was flourishing in their midst. Rotrou's son, Rotrou III, married Matilda, the daughter of Count Theobald of Blois. By this marriage, the house of Perche acquired family ties with some of the greatest literary patrons of the time. Count Henry I ("The Liberal") of Champagne, Theobald of Blois, and William of the White Hands (*Blanches-mains*), bishop of Chartres and then archbishop of Sens and of Rheims, were all brothers of Rotrou III's wife, Matilda. Henry of Champagne and Theobald of Blois were married to two daughters of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Marie of Champagne and Ade-laise (Alix, Aélis), respectively. The former, of course, was one of Chrétien de Troyes's chief patrons, and the court of the latter at Blois seems to have been a place where troubadours from the north mixed freely with the trouvères and jongleurs of Occitania.⁴¹ Even Philip of Flanders, the count to whom Chrétien's *Conte du graal* is dedicated, falls within the family ambit of the counts of Perche. His wife, Elisabeth of Vermandois, is the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine's sister.⁴² In the midst of such courtly and cultured circles there would be no shortage of literary talent, and no lack of encouragement for poets to tell stories that might bring to mind the Perche and its famous counts.

It is little wonder, in these tightly knit circles of politics and culture, that a story about the fictional "Perceval" should be cloaked, and that his homeland be transferred from the all-to-familiar county of the Perche to the remote, but very similar, land of deep forests and valleys that is Wales. Since the fictional character Perceval was also to be attached to the "Matter of Britain" and the stories of King Arthur and his court, it was fitting that his story take place nearer to Arthur's homeland. But the historical Perche is perhaps still recognizable in the setting of Chrétien's *Conte du graal*. Perceval's Wales, like the Perche, is a place protected by deep forests,

with many valleys where cattle graze and fields are cultivated in relative safety and isolation. Even the Percheron skill in raising powerful workhorses for which the county is famous in our own day may be recognizable in Chrétien's loving descriptions of the fine hunting horse that Perceval must abandon when he becomes a knight.

We do not know if such a transformation of the count of the Perche into "Perceval" took place, or who first associated Perceval with a sacred and enigmatic vessel called a "Grail." Perhaps we shall never know. But we can say with some confidence the following: At a time, early in the twelfth century, when no one had yet heard of a hero named "Perceval" or of a vessel called a "Holy Grail," an artist in the Pyrenees was charged with the task of decorating the apse of St. Clement's church in the village of Taüll. When he came to paint the Virgin, standing in the midst of the Apostles and directly beneath the image of Christ in Majesty, the Master of St. Clement put into her hands a simple platter or shallow bowl, called a "grail" (*gradal, grazal, grazaus*) in the local dialect. The artist depicted the grail with beams of reddish fire or light radiating from it, and held in the covered hand of the Virgin, indicating its sanctity. Other artists in the region painted the same scene, with the Virgin holding some sort of stylized vessel. They all, it seems, intended to represent something of the sacred history of Christ's Ascension and of Pentecost, where this holy vessel in the hand of the Virgin was a sign of the Holy Spirit and of the Church's sacraments by which God was made physically present on earth for all time. The Master who first imagined and represented this scene with a fiery grail would, no doubt, have been surprised at the fortune of his humble invention in the years to come.

Some fifty years later, in the north of France, Chrétien de Troyes heard of, or invented, a new story about a knight named Perceval who had failed to ask an important question about a mysterious

lance and a holy grail. This was, he thought, proper material for the “finest story that could be told at royal court,” and he told it for his patron, Philip of Flanders, with consummate skill. The story came to Chrétien, it would seem, from the south—from the poets and storytellers of Occitania and Catalonia. That is where the word “grail” was used to designate an ordinary piece of tableware. It is also where one could see or hear about the beautiful paintings in the apse of St. Clement of Taüll, and about the image of the Virgin and her holy grail. Did the anonymous poet or jongleur, or Rotrou himself, know what this mysterious grail in the hand of the Virgin represented? It seems not, and perhaps their failure to ask the question when they had the opportunity is at the heart of the later story. In any case the strangeness and the mystery of the image must have been a large part of its attractiveness. Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Robert de Boron each sought in turn to make sense of this enigmatic vessel by telling stories about it. Their poetic inventions have inspired others, poets as well as scholars, down to our own day, testifying to the deep fruitfulness of the image and of the story of the Holy Grail.

What, then, is the Holy Grail? Where and how is it to be found? These questions are not, in the end, to be answered by historical investigation. We can discover, it seems, how a piece of common tableware first came to be depicted as a holy vessel or grail by a creative artist in the Pyrenees, and how this grail was subsequently transformed by the poetic imagination into an object of desire of the knights of King Arthur’s Round Table, and then into a holy relic of Christ’s passion. But the Grail itself would seem to have a life of its own. We have no reason to believe that its liveliness will soon be contained or exhausted. Its sources, and its power to move us, will continue to be sought and found in the creative imaginations of those who tell its story.

Notes

Chapter 1. Chrétien de Troyes

1. Still perhaps the best introduction to Chrétien in English is Jean Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, trans. Raymond J. Cormier (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982).
2. See Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, 3–6. For references to more recent studies see Jean-Marie Fritz, “Chrétien de Troyes,” in *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: Le Moyen Age*, 2nd ed., ed. Geneviève Hase-nohr and Michel Zink (Paris: Fayard, 1992), 266–280; and Douglas Kelly, *Chrétien de Troyes: An Analytical Bibliography, Supplement I* (London: Tamesis, 2002).
3. See Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, 5–6.
4. I quote from the prose translation of David Staines, *The Complete Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), except that I refrain from translating the word “graal” whenever it occurs in the text; Staines generally translates the word as “cup.” References to the text are given to the line numbers in the edition by Keith Busby, *Chrétien de Troyes, Le Roman de Perceval ou Le Conte du Graal* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1993), and by page number to the translation by Staines.
5. See Rupert T. Pickens, “Histoire et commentaire chez Chrétien de Troyes et Robert de Boron: Robert de Boron et le livre de Philippe de Flandre,” in Norris J. Lacy, Douglas Kelly, and Keith Busby, eds., *The Legacy of Chrétien de Troyes*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987–1988), 2:17–39, at 22–23. For a general discussion of the *topos*, see Charles Witke, *Numen litterarum: The Old and the New in Latin Poetry from Constantine to Gregory the Great* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971).
6. Jean Frappier, “Chrétien de Troyes,” in Richard Sherman Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages: A Collaborative History* (Oxford: Clar-

endon Press, 1959), 157–191, at 185. Cf. Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, 127.

7. The scanty evidence that there may have been a story about Perceval and the Grail circulating before Chrétien wrote his *Conte* will be discussed in Chapter 8.

8. Frappier, “Chrétien de Troyes,” 185. Frappier’s position is given cautious support by Fritz, “Chrétien,” 278–279, and Fritz, “Graal,” in *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises*, 556–561. The best recent survey of the various theories concerning the origins of the Grail is found in Joan Ramon Resina, *La búsqueda del grail*, Ámbitos Literarios / Ensayo, 19 (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1988), 294–349. In English, the best summary is perhaps that of Urban Tigner Holmes, *Chrétien de Troyes* (New York: Twayne, 1970), 137–150. See also Richard Barber, *The Holy Grail: Imagination and Belief* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 290–370.

9. See Chapter 4 for further discussion.

10. “Ad Sancta Fide coenobio gradales duas de argento, ad Sancto Vicencio de Castres anapos duos de argento,” quoted by Charles du Cange (1610–1688), in his *Glossarium mediae et infimae latinitatis* (Paris: Librairie des sciences et des arts, 1937–1938), s.v. *gradalis*. See Joan Corominas, “Apèndix sobre GREALA i el GREAL,” in his *Diccionari etimològic i complementari de la llengua catalana* (Barcelona: Curial Edicions Catalanes, 1984), 4:637–641.

11. “Vexe[!]la de auro et de argento, id sunt enapos v, et gradals ii, copes ii et cuylares v.” Corominas, *Diccionari etimològic i complementari de la llengua catalana*, 4:637.

12. “Memoria de leudis quas dns. Rex recipit . . . in villa Perpinianii . . . item de qualibet saumata de cabironis minutis, unum cabironem . . . Item de qual. saum. de aladrigues, unam aladriguam; item de cifis, scutellis, et grasalibus, e talliatoribus, et culeris ligneis, et de conquis ligneis, unum cifum vel scutellam.” Corominas, *Diccionari etimològic i complementari de la llengua catalana*, 4:637.

13. Corominas, *Diccionari etimològic i complementari de la llengua catalana*, 4:637.

14. *Girart de Roussillon, chanson de geste*, ed. W. Mary Hackett (Paris: Picard, 1953), 73, 288 (vv. 1622–1623, 6369–6370); cf. Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, 140.

15. *The Medieval French Roman d’Alexandre*, 3, *Version of Alexandre de Paris*, Variants and Notes to Branch 1, ed. A. Foulet (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 91–92 (ll. 601, 611, and commentary). See Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes: The Man and His Work*, 140.

Chapter 2. Wolfram von Eschenbach

1. For a survey of the many tales composed in the immediate wake of Chrétien’s *Conte*, see Mireille Séguy, *Les romans du Graal, ou le signe imaginé* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2001); Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*.

2. See Otto Springer, “Wolfram’s *Parzival*,” in Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, 218–250. Scholars are generally agreed on a date of composition between 1200 and 1212; see *ibid.*, 220; cf. Joachim Bumke, “Wolfram von Eschenbach,” in *Die deutsche Literatur des Mittelalters, Verfasser Lexikon*, ed. Wolfgang Stammel et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 10:1376–1418.

3. Springer, “Wolfram’s *Parzival*,” 218–220; Bumke, “Wolfram von Eschenbach,” 1376–1381, 1397–1412.

4. I have used the edition by Karl Lachmann, revised and commented on by Eberhard Nellmann, *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994). The English translation is based on that of Arthur T. Hatto, *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival* (London: Penguin Books, 1980), which I have occasionally altered, for the sake of clarity or style, by reference to the German text and to the English translation by Helen M. Mustard and Charles E. Passage: *Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival: A Romance of the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1961). References are given to the book, strophe, and line numbers of the German text, and to page numbers in Hatto’s translation.

5. For the influence of the Order of the Knights Templar on Wolfram see Willem Snelleman, *Das Haus Anjou und der Orient in Wolframs Parzifal* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1941), 121–132; Helen Adolf, *Visio Pacis: Holy City and Grail: An Attempt at an Inner History of the Grail Legend* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1960); Gregory J. Wilkin, “The Dissolution of the Templar Idea in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *English Studies* 63 (1982): 109–121, esp. 111, nn. 9–10.

6. For a good survey of the question, see Springer, “Wolfram’s *Parzival*,” 221–224. The overwhelming trend in recent scholarship has been to dismiss entirely Kyot and the other sources as poetic inventions; see Hatto, trans., *Wolfram von Eschenbach: Parzival*, 426–429. But the search continues; see, for example, André de Mandach, *Auf den Spuren des Heiligen Gral: Die gemeinsame Vorlage im pyrenäischen Geheimcode von Chrétien de Troyes und Wolfram von Eschenbach* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1995), 39–61.

7. See, for example, Adrian Stevens, “Fiction, Plot and Discourse: Wolfram’s *Parzival* and Its Narrative Sources,” in Will Hasty, ed., *A Companion to Wolfram’s “Parzival”* (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1999), 99–123.

8. Wolfram seems here to be recording a Latin name for the Grail-stone that he has heard, but not seen written; *lapsit exillis* has no obvious meaning in classical or medieval Latin. Medieval scribes who copied the story rendered Wolfram’s “aural” Latin in various ways: *iaspis*, *lapis*, and *erillis*, *exilis*, *exillix*, *exilix*. Modern editors have proposed many emendations of the text, including *lapis herilis*, *berillis*, *textilis*, *lapis ex celis*, *lapis electrix* or *elixir*. The reading *lapsit exillis* was adopted by the famed editor and textual critic Karl Lachmann (d. 1851) and has been followed by all subsequent editors. Lachmann would probably not have been swayed in his editorial choice by the ingenious suggestion of

the renowned nineteenth-century German historian Leopold von Ranke, who argued that a reading like *lapis exilis* (small or worthless stone) would fit well with the story, known to Wolfram, of Alexander the Great's journey to Paradise. This story describes a stone (*lapis*) sent to the emperor from the earthly paradise. The stone is said to be a small or worthless object (*substantia exilis*), but its weight turns out to be many times that of gold. When this is described to Alexander, he is cured of ambition and pride. See Springer, "Wolfram's *Parzival*," 233–234.

9. For a recent survey of the many inconclusive attempts to identify the sources and meaning of Wolfram's Grail-stone, see Sidney Johnson, "Doing His Own Thing: Wolfram's Grail," in Hasty, ed., *A Companion to Wolfram's "Parzival,"* 77–93.

10. Wolfram has the hermit retract this statement in Book 16, and present the orthodox opinion that all the angels chose from the beginning either to serve God or to war with Him (16, 798; p. 396).

11. On the new methods of hearing confessions being fostered especially in the Parisian schools at the beginning of the thirteenth century, see Joseph Goering, "The *Summa de penitentia* of Magister Serlo," *Mediaeval Studies* 40 (1978): 290–311; on horse-stealing, see *ibid.*, 303–304, n. 56.

12. Springer, "Wolfram's *Parzival*," 240. The continuations have been edited by William Roach, *The Continuations of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press and American Philosophical Society, 1949–1983); a useful summary of them is found in Barber, *Holy Grail*, 27–38.

13. See Springer, "Wolfram's *Parzival*," 249.

Chapter 3. Robert de Boron

1. In the last lines of the poem, Robert twice refers to his work as "the great history of the Grail" (*DOU GRAAL la plus grant ESTOIRE . . . La grant ESTOIRE DOU GRAAL*); see Robert de Boron, *Joseph d'Arimathie: A Critical Edition of the Verse and Prose Versions*, ed. Richard O'Gorman (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1995), 334 (ll. 3487, 3493). There is no textual or manuscript support for the modern title, *Joseph d'Arimathie*. This title dates from the nineteenth century and has been generally accepted today to distinguish the first book of Robert's cycle of poems from the others, and to avoid confusion of Robert's work with the first book of the "Vulgate" cycle (see note 8, below), inspired by Robert's romance and entitled the *Estoire del Saint Graal*; see O'Gorman, ed., *Joseph d'Arimathie*, 339 n. 1 and 407 n. 1.

2. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the verse version of Robert's poem in O'Gorman, ed., *Joseph d'Arimathie*, and the translations are from Robert de Boron, *Joseph of Arimathea: A Romance of the Grail*, trans. Jean Rogers (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1990). I have followed Rogers's transla-

tion except in her rendering of *grant* (*le grant histoire*) as “high,” and in some details described below in note 16. References are given to line numbers in O’Gorman’s edition and to page numbers in Rogers’s translation. The recent translation by Nigel Bryant, *Merlin and the Grail. Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval: The Trilogy of Arthurian Romances Attributed to Robert de Boron*, translates a single manuscript (Modena, Bibliotheca Estense MS. E.39), which text, however interesting in itself, is not among the best witnesses to the original composition by Robert de Boron.

3. See O’Gorman, ed., *Joseph d’Arimathie*, 406 n. 3492.

4. On Robert, see Pierre le Gentil, “The Work of Robert de Boron and the *Didot Perceval*,” in Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, 251–262; Jean-Marie Fritz, “Robert de Boron,” in *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises*, 1280–1281.

5. See O’Gorman, ed., *Joseph d’Arimathie*, 406 n. 3490; Jean Longnon, *Les compagnons de Villehardouin: Recherches sur les croisés de la quatrième croisade* (Geneva: Droz, 1978).

6. Pierre Gallais, in his “Robert de Boron en Orient,” *Mélanges de langue et de littérature du Moyen Age et de la Renaissance offerts à Jean Frappier*, 2 vols. (Geneva: Droz, 1970), 1:313–319, would date the work slightly later, arguing that Robert accompanied Walter on Crusade. He thus dates the “telling” to 1202–1212, and the writing of the poem to sometime after Walter’s death in 1212.

7. Many manuscripts of the prose version also included a prose version of the entire *Merlin* poem, that is, not only a prose translation of the first 504 lines of Robert’s verse but the complete story, thus leading scholars to suppose that there was, at one time, a complete poem of *Merlin* from Robert’s pen that now is lost. Other manuscripts include also a prose version of the *Perceval* story, and this too is ascribed either to Robert or to “Pseudo-Robert” of Boron. Thus Robert may have set out to compose a cycle of poems that would provide a detailed account of the Grail’s past, from its origins at Christ’s crucifixion (the *Joseph d’Arimathie*), through its entry into the affairs of Britain and the story of King Arthur (the *Merlin*), and then to the conclusion of the story in the quests for the Grail by *Perceval* and the Knights of the Round Table, and the death of King Arthur. See O’Gorman, ed., *Joseph d’Arimathie*, 6–12; Pickens, “Histoire et commentaire chez Chrétien de Troyes et Robert de Boron,” 17–39.

8. On this work see Chapter 4, note 7. See also Jean Frappier, “The Vulgate Cycle,” and Alexandre Micha, “The Vulgate *Merlin*,” in Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature in the Middle Ages*, 295–318, and 319–324. For an English translation of the entire cycle see Norris J. Lacy, ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993–1996).

9. A convenient introduction and English translation of the Gospel of Nicodemus (also known as the *Acts of Pilate*) can be found in *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in an English*

*Translation based on M. R. James, ed. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 164–204. For its enormous popularity and influence in the Middle Ages, see *The Medieval Gospel of Nicodemus: Texts, Intertexts, and Contexts in Western Europe*, ed. Zbigniew Izydorczyk (Tempe, Ariz.: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1997).*

10. This is the title given to Robert's work in the unique manuscript of the verse version; see O'Gorman, ed., *Joseph d'Arimathie*, 339.

11. The source of Robert's story of Judas and the tithe of the three hundred pennies is probably to be found in the treatise *De sacro altaris mysterio* of Lotario de' Conti di Segni (Pope Innocent III) written ca. 1198, printed in the *Patrologiae cursus completus, series Latina* [PL] 217:851.

12. Michel Zink has suggested, to the contrary, that the “sacrament” Robert has in mind is not the eucharist but, perhaps, Jesus's washing of the Apostles' feet. See Zink, *Poésie et conversion au moyen âge*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003), 286–303. One may agree with Zink (p. 287) about the “quasi-absence” of the Eucharist in Robert's Grail history, and in affirming that Robert does not equate the Grail with the eucharistic chalice (see below), without going so far as to question the close identification of the Grail with the Eucharist that seems clearly intended here by the author.

13. Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–22; cf. 1 Corinthians 11:25.

14. The English translation is that which was used before the liturgical reforms of the 1960s; it is a more literal rendition of the Latin text from Robert's day.

15. See Mark 15:42–47, John 19:38–42; “Gospel of Nicodemus” [The Acts of Pilate, 11, 2], in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, 177.

16. I have altered Rogers's translation by leaving out the definite article in two places, “[the] corporal” and “[the] chalice,” in accordance with the French, which reads: “Li dras ou fui envelopez / Sera corporaus apelez. / Cist veissiaus ou men sanc meis / Quant de men cors le reueillis / Calices apelez sera. / La platine ki sus girra / Iert la pierre senefiee.” O'Gorman, ed., *Joseph d'Arimathie*, 110, ll. 905–911.

17. See the discussion in O'Gorman, ed., *Joseph d'Arimathie*, 361–362, nn. 901–906. The best recent study is by Manuel Insolera, “Robert de Boron, lo Pseudo-Germano e Onorio Augustodunense: Il Graal e il mistero della transustanziazione,” *Romania* 108 (1987): 268–287.

18. On Honorius Augustodunensis, see Valerie I. J. Flint, *Honorius Augustodunensis of Regensburg*, Authors of the Middle Ages, 6 (Brookfield, Vt.: Ashgate, 1995); M.-O. Garrigues, “Quelques recherches sur l'oeuvre d'Honorius Augustodunensis,” *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* 70 (1975): 388–425; Garrigues, “L'oeuvre d'Honorius Augustodunensis, inventaire critique,” *Abhandlungen der Braunschweigischen Wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaft* 40 (1988): 7–136; 39 (1987): 123–228.

19. “Dicente sacerdote, ‘Per omnia saecula saeculorum,’ diaconus venit, calicem coram eo sustollit, cum favone partem ejus cooperit, in altari reponit et cum corporali cooperit, preeferens Joseph ab Arimathea, qui corpus Christi deposituit, faciem ejus sudario cooperuit, in monumento deposituit, lapide cooperuit. Hic oblata, et calix cum corporali cooperitur, quod sindonem mundam significat, in quam Joseph corpus Christi involvebat. Calix hic, sepulcrum; patena lapidem designat, qui sepulcrum clauerat,” Honorius Augustodunensis, *Gemma animae*, c. 47, PL 172:588. The Latin text may be corrupt; a critical edition of the *Gemma animae* is much to be desired.

20. Insolera, “Robert de Boron,” 278–285.

21. See William A. Nitze, *Le roman de l’histoire dou graal* (Paris: Champion, 1927), xi; O’Gorman, ed., *Joseph d’Arimathie*, 363–365, n. 935.

22. For what may be the earliest attempt to find such a book, see Chapter 4.

23. See O’Gorman, ed., *Joseph d’Arimathie*, 366, n. 1015.

24. On the “Veronica” veil, still honored today as a precious relic in the Vatican, see Gerhard Wolf, “From Mandylion to Veronica: Picturing the ‘Disembodied’ Face and Disseminating the True Image of Christ in the Latin West,” in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation*, Villa Spelman Colloquia, 6, ed. Herbert L. Kessler and Gerhard Wolf (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1998), 153–179; Christoph Egger, “Papst Innocenz III. und die Veronica: Geschichte, Theologie, Liturgie und Seelsorge,” in *The Holy Face and the Paradox of Representation*, 181–203.

25. See Pierre le Gentil, “The Work of Robert de Boron and the *Didot Perceval*,” 257.

26. Much has been written about the “vale of Avalon.” Already in the thirteenth century people had identified it with the Isle of Avalon, and with Glastonbury in England; see O’Gorman, ed., *Joseph d’Arimathie*, p. 398, n. 3123. But this identification has been challenged, for example, by Louis Charvet, who suggests that Robert’s *vau d’avaron* actually represent the vale of Avalon in Burgundy, not far from the region of Champagne, and near Robert de Boron’s native land. See Louis Charvet, *Des vaus d’avalon à la queste du graal* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1967).

27. In later stories, Joseph of Arimathea will not remain in the Holy Land but rather will become the “apostle of Britain.” See O’Gorman, ed., *Joseph d’Arimathie*, 405, nn. 3455, 3459.

Chapter 4. Hélinand de Froidmont

1. See Gillette Tyl-Labory, “Hélinand de Froidmont,” in *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises*, 666–668; Edmé R. Smits, “Hélinand of Froidmont and the A-text of Seneca’s Tragedies,” *Mnemosyne* 36 (1983): 324–358; Beverly Kienzle, *Cistercians, Heresy, and Crusade in Occitania, 1145–1229: Preaching in the Lord’s Vineyard* (York: York Medieval Press, 2001), 174–182.

2. Smits, “Hélinand of Froidmont,” 324–358; Marinus M. Woesthuis, “‘Nunc ad historiam revertamur’: History and Preaching in Hélinand of Froidmont,” *Sacris erudiri* 34 (1994): 313–333, at 315.

3. The most thorough attempt to date the *Chronicon* is still that of J. Neale Carmen, “The Relationship of the *Perlesvaus* and the *Queste de Saint Graal*,” *Bulletin of the University of Kansas, Humanistic Studies* 5, no. 4 (1936). He argues for a date between 1211 and 1223. I am indebted to Marinus Woesthuis for discussing issues concerning the *Chronicon* with me.

4. See the thoughtful observations of Woesthuis, “‘Nunc ad historiam revertamur,’” 313–333.

5. “Hoc tempore in Britannia cuidam eremita monstrata est mirabilis quaedam visio per angelum de sancto Joseph decurione, qui corpus Domini depositum de cruce; et de catino illo sive paropside, in quo Dominus coenavit cum discipulis suis; de quo ab eodem eremita descripta est historia, quae dicitur de gradali. Gradalis autem sive gradale Gallice dicitur scutella lata, et aliquantulum profunda; in qua pretiosae dapes cum suo jure divitibus solent apponi gradatim, unus morsellus post alium in diversis ordinibus; et dicitur vulgari nomine graalz, quia grata et acceptabilis est in ea comedenti: tum propter continens, quia forte argentea est, vel de alia pretiosa materia; tum propter contentum, id est ordinem multiplicem pretiosarum dapum. Hanc historiam Latine scriptam invenire non potui, sed tantum Gallice scripta habetur a quibusdam proceribus, nec facile, ut aiunt, tota inveniri potest. Hanc autem nondum potui ad legendum sedulo ab aliquo impetrare. Quod mox ut potuero, verisimiliora et utiliora succincte transferam in Latinum”; *PL* 212: 814–815. I thank A. G. Rigg for discussing the translation with me.

6. See Chapter 3.

7. *L'estoire del saint graal*, ed. Jean-Paul Ponceau, 2 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1997). Ponceau argues for a date of composition between 1220 and 1230 in vol. 1, xi–xiv. This prose “history,” was very popular, surviving in more than forty medieval manuscripts, and formed the first book of what is often referred to as the Vulgate cycle of Arthurian histories. Ponceau refers to this group of stories by the more recent name, “the Lancelot-Graal cycle”; see 1:ix, n. 2. The *Estoire del saint graal* has been translated into English by Carol J. Chase, “The History of the Holy Grail,” in Norris J. Lacy, ed., *Lancelot-Grail: The Old French Arthurian Vulgate and Post-Vulgate in Translation*, 5 vols. (New York: Garland, 1993–1996), 1:1–163.

8. “Ichil lieus . . . estoit lontieus et destornés de toutes gens, et tant en puis jou bien dire ke il estoit en un des plus sauvages lieus ki fust en tout la Bloie Bretaigne,” Ponceau, ed., *L'estoire del saint graal*, 2.

9. Ponceau, ed., *L'estoire del saint graal*, 1–2. The French word *estoire* means both “history” and “story”; Chase renders this passage: “such a noble and lofty story as that of the Grail, the foundation of all stories”; Chase, trans., “The History of the Holy Grail,” 3.

10. See Chapter 1.
11. See Chapter 3.
12. See Ponceau, ed., *L'estoire del saint graal*, 660, s.v. *escuele*.
13. For a similar transliteration of a vernacular word “grail” into Latinate form, see Chapter 1, p. 14.
14. See O’Gorman, ed., *Joseph d’Arimathie*, 388–389; n. 2654.

Chapter 5. The Bishop of Roda/Barbastre and the Churches of Taüll

1. On Raymund, bishop of Roda/Barbastre from 1104 to 1126, see Jordi Boix i Pociello, “Els Bisbes de Ribagorça-Roda,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, vol. 16, *La Ribagorça* (Barcelona: Enciclopèdia Catalana, 1996), 48–50, at 49; Manuel Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena* (Jaca: Instituto de Estudios Pirenaicos, 1980), 117–132; Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena: Historia y arte* (Barbastro: Moïses, 1989), 44–56; Antonio Duran Gudiol, “La Santa Sede y los obispados de Huesca y Roda en la primera mitad del siglo XII,” *Anthologica Annua* 13 (1965): 35–133.
2. The act of consecration, dated 8 November 1123, is printed in *Catalunya Romànica*, vol. 16, *La Ribagorça*, 473.
3. An early version of this argument can be found in Joseph Goering, “The Virgin and the Grail: A Forgotten Twelfth-Century Cult,” in *Saints and the Sacred*, Proceedings of a St. Michael’s College Symposium (25–26 February 2000) (New York: Legas, 2001), 163–184.
4. See Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena: Historia y Arte*, 52–55.
5. See Cebrià Baraut, *Les actes de consagracions d'esglésies de l'antic bisbat d'Urgell (segles IX–XII)* (La Seu d’Urgell: Societat Cultural Urgel•litana, 1986), 179, no. 83.
6. “Anno ab incarnatione / domini m. c. xx. iii, iiii idus decembris / venit raimundus episcopus barbastre/nsis et consecravit hanc ecclesiam in honore / sancti clementis martyris et ponens reliquias / in altare sancti cornelii episcopi et martyris.” See *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 248. This inscription is discussed further in Chapter 6.
7. Tarragona, Biblioteca Pública MS 26. It came to Tarragona from the Cistercian Monastery of the Holy Crosses near Tarragona. See Jesús Domínguez Bordona, *Manuscritos de la Biblioteca Pública de Tarragona* (Tarragona: Instituto de Estudios Tarraconenses “Ramón Berenguer IV,” 1954), 41–42, no. 26.
8. On the *Collectio Tarraconensis*, so named after this copy of the collection in the Tarragona library, see Lotte Kéry, *Canonical Collections of the Early Middle Ages (ca. 400–1140): A Bibliographical Guide to the Manuscripts and Literature* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1999), 204–205.
9. Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena* (1980), 117. Shortly after his death in 1126, Raymund was canonized for his saintly virtues; his life (*Vita*) was written by a canon of the cathedral at Roda named Elias and is printed in the *Acta*

Sanctorum, 67 vols. (Paris: Palmé, 1863–1940), 25:108–117 (June 21). Relevant texts from the life and from the office composed for the translation of his relics are collected by Antonio Duran Gudiol, “La Santa Sede y los obispados de Huesca y Roda,” 123–125.

10. On St. Sernin, see Marcel Durliat, *Saint-Sernin de Toulouse* (Toulouse: Eché, 1986).

11. Tarragona, MS 26, fols. 193v–194r. This memorandum has been published by F. Valls-Taverner, “Une antiga relació historica Ribagorçana,” *Estudis Universitaris Catalans* 12 (1927): 458–460.

12. Tarragona MS 26, fol. 193v. For a good modern account, see Jordi Boix i Pociello, “La Ribagorça entre els segle VIII i XII,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 30–105.

13. Tarragona MS 26, fol. 193v. Cf. Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena* (1980), 47–48.

14. Tarragona MS 26, fol. 194r. Cf. Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena* (1980), 51–80.

15. “Quo [Solomon] egecto ab episcopatu acusacione suorum, electus est episcopus probus Raimundus Dalmacii. Qui astutia et sanguine et precibus a religioso domino Sancio rege effecit ex paupere episcopatum mediocre. Et posuit sedem suam in Rota, pro eo quod prefatus rex dedit sibi in alodium Rotam, et uocatus est primus Rotensis episcopus. Ante eum uero episcopi Ripacuricensis uocabantur.” Tarragona MS 26, fol. 194r; cf. Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena* (1980), 81–101.

16. “Post eius obitum electus est dominus Poncius, qui Barbastrensis uocatus est episcopus eo quod in diebus scilicet eius capta sit ciuitas Barbastrum. Et ipse impetravit a duobus apostolicis, Urbano et Pascali, priuilegium super Barbastrum et Ylerdam cum omnibus terminis suis.” Tarragona MS 26, fol. 194r; cf. Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena* (1980), 103–116. For the privileges from Pope Paschal, see note 17.

17. For example, on fols. 24v–25r: a letter from Oleguer, the archbishop of Tarragona, to Raymund, answering a question about a complicated marriage case involving incest and adultery. On fol. 193r: a letter of 1100 from Pope Paschal II to the king of Aragon, and the count and vice-count of Urgell, concerning the boundaries of the diocese of Roda, and another letter, probably from 1110, from Pope Paschal to the bishop of Urgell, reprimanding him for encroaching on the diocese of Roda, and demanding that both he and the bishop of Roda should come to Rome and submit their disputes to papal judgment. On fol. 194: a document addressed to Bishop Raymund, dated 15 March [the year is illegible], and signed by King Sancho of Aragon and other nobles. On fol. 198: a letter of Pope Paschal II to Bishop Pons, dated 25 April 1100, determining the boundaries and confirming the rights of the bishop of Roda/Barbastre. Another letter of Paschal II to Bishop Pons is found on fol. 202r, and the same pope’s letter to King Pedro I of Aragon in 1103? is on fol. 202v.

On fol. 224 is a letter of Paschal II to Bishop Raymund, dated 2 May 1110, again confirming the boundaries and the fiscal rights of the diocese.

18. Tarragona, MS 26, fols. 222v–223r. A similar ordo is found in the Pontifical of Vic, early twelfth century, Vic, Bibl. Cap. MS 14, fols. 8–10; see Miguel S. Gros, “El antiguo ordo bautismal catalano-narbonense,” *Hispania Sacra* 28 (1975): 37–51, at 43 no. 26.

19. For the general historical background, see Clay Stalls, *Possessing the Land: Aragon's Expansion into Islam's Ebro Frontier Under Alfonso the Battler, 1104–1134* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), 1–58; Thomas N. Bisson, *The Medieval Crown of Aragon: A Short History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 10–30.

20. See Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena* (1980), 108–109.

21. See Manuel Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isábena: Historia y Arte*, 54–55; Jordi Boix i Pociello, “La Ribagorça entre els segles VIII i XII,” 39–40.

22. See Baraut, *Les actes de consagracions d'esglésies de l'antic bisbat d'Urgell*, 14–17.

23. For Raymund's trip to Rome, via Toulouse, in 1120, see Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena* (1980), 126. Raymund also placed relics of St. Cornelius in the church of Merli (dedicated on 22 November 1122), in the monastery church at Alahon (8 November 1123), and in the altar of the cathedral at Roda (31 March 1125); see Eduard Carbonell i Esteller, “Sant Climent de Taüll,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 248.

24. See Renato Aprile, “Cornelio, papa,” in *Bibliotheca sanctorum*, vol. 4 (Rome: Istituto Giovanni XXIII, 1964), 184–189.

25. For Raymund's visit to Rome in 1120, see note 23. Richard Krautheimer, *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 161–202, offers an excellent description of the city during this period.

26. See Krautheimer, *Rome*, 161–163; Leonard Boyle, *A Short Guide to St. Clement's, Rome* (Rome: Collegio San Clemente, 1989).

27. The Order for Blessing a Church (*Ordo ad benedicendam ecclesiam*) is copied on fols. 203v–212v of Raymund's book, Tarragona MS 26. The instructions and prayers are very similar to the “Roman Pontifical of the Twelfth Century,” ed. Michel Andrieu, *Le Pontifical romain au moyen-âge*, 1, *Le Pontifical romain du XIIe siècle* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1938). See also Josep Romà Barriga Planas, *El sacramentari, ritual i pontifical de Roda: Cod. 16 de l'arxiu de la Catedral de Lleida, ca. 1000* (Barcelona: Fundació Salvador Vives Casajuana, 1975), 482–518. For an excellent introduction to the rite of church consecrations and an English translation of a slightly earlier form of the liturgy, see Brian Repscher, *The Rite of Church Dedication in the Early Medieval Era* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998).

28. Musical notation is provided for this, and for many of the other hymns and chants, in Raymund's book.

29. See the entry for “chrism” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1922).

30. Tarragona, MS 26, fols. 213r–217r. Raymund's text varies somewhat from the versions of the ritual printed by Michel Andrieu, *Le Pontifical romain au moyen-âge*.

31. Tarragona, MS 26, fols. 196v–198r. On fols. 200r–202r Raymund included some answers from the Roman Cardinals to questions posed to them by his predecessor, Pons. One of these had asked whether the eucharistic chalice and the crucifix in a church should be consecrated with simple oil or with chrism. The answer was: “Quod crux Domini vel calix non oleo set crismate debent iniungi. Crucem Domini vel calicem unde interrogasti non oleo sed crismate pro consuetudine romane ecclesie solum [consecratur],” fol. 200v.

32. Baraut, *Les Actes de consagraciones*, 179, reports that the parchment recording the act of dedication of Santa Maria on 11 December 1123 was found in a box containing relics beneath the altar stone of that church. I have been unable to locate this document, but contemporary instructions say that the charter should contain the Ten Commandments, the first words of the four Gospels, the bishop's name, the year, and the names of the saints whose relics are interred (see Baraut, *Les actes de consagraciones*, 46, n. 78). A model formula for such a document, dated 1120, is found on fol. 203v of Raymund's book (Tarragona MS 26): “Audi Israel, i. Dominus Deus tuus Deus unus est. ii. Non assumas nomen dei tui in uanum. iii. Obserua diem sabbati. ivi. Honora patrem et matrem. v. Non occides. vi. Non mecaberis. vii. Non facies furtum. viii. Non loqueris falsum testimonium. viiiii. Non concupisces uxorem proximi tui. x. Non concupisces rem proximi tui. Inicium sancti euangelii secundum Mattheum: Liber generacionis ihesu christi filii Dauid, filii Abraham. Inicium sancti euangelii secundum Lucham: Fuit in diebus Herodis regis Iudeae sacerdos quidam nomine Zacharias de uice Abia. Inicium sancti euangelii secundum Marcham: Initium euangelii Ihesu Christi filii Dauid. Sicut scriptum est in Ysaia propheta. Inicium sancti euangelii secundum Iohannem: In principio erat uerbum, et uerbum erat apud deum, et deus erat uerbum. Anno ab incarnatione domini m. c. xx., N. episcopus N. consecrauit hanc aecclasiam in honore N. Sancti, ponens in altari reliquias sanctorum illorum, illa die.” The rite for the consecration of the cemetery (*Benedictio cimiterii*) is found in Raymund's book on fols. 212v–213r.

33. For a general introduction, see the *Romanesque Art Guide of the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya in Barcelona*, 70–83, 96–105, and the comarcal (county) guide to Romanesque art and architectural remains in Catalonia, *Guies Catalunya romànica comarcals*, vol. 7, *La Ribagorça*, 31–38. The most thorough treatment is in *Catalunya Romànica*, vol. 16, *La Ribagorça*, 222–240 (S. Maria) and 240–257 (St. Clement).

34. The fascinating story of the rediscovery of these paintings, and of the artists who first reproduced them and made them available to a wide audience, is told by Milagros Guardia, Jordi Camps, and Immaculada Lorés, *El descubrimiento de la pintura mural románica catalana: La colección de reproducciones del MNAC* (Barcelona: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, 1993).

35. For this and what follows, see Guardia, Camps, and Lorés, *El descubrimiento de la pintura mural románica catalana*, 28–33; descriptions of Vallhonrat's work in each of the Romanesque churches he visited are found on 48–93.

36. [Josep Pijoan], *Les pintures murals catalanes*, 3, *S. Climent de Tahull, Sta Maria de Tahull, Sta Maria de Bohi, Sta Maria d'Aneu, S. Pere del Burgal* (Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 1911).

37. Peter K. Klein, “The Romanesque in Catalonia,” in *The Art of Medieval Spain A.D. 500–1200* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), 194.

38. Christopher R. Dodwell, *The Pictorial Arts of the West, 800–1200*, Pelican History of Art (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 258.

39. Otto Demus and Max Hirmer, *Romanesque Mural Painting* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1970), 479.

Chapter 6. The Master of St. Clement

1. Charles L. Kuhn, *Romanesque Mural Painting of Catalonia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), 21.
2. See Antoni Morer and Manuel Font-Altaba, “Materials pictòrics medievals: Investigació de les pintures murals romàniques a Catalunya,” *Butlletí del Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya* 1 (1993): 71–115.
3. See *Romanesque Art Guide* (MNAC), 44 and 76; Joan-Albert Adell i Gisbert, Eduard Carbonell i Esteller, Lluïsa Carabasa i Villaneuva, et al., “Sant Climent de Taüll,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 240–257, at 248, summarizing the findings of Morer and Font-Altaba, “Materials pictòrics medievals.”
4. *Romanesque Art Guide*, 70.
5. *Romanesque Art Guide*, 70–71. See also Klein, “The Romanesque in Catalonia,” 194, who writes: “His style derives from that of Southern France, more specifically Languedoc and Poitou”; Otto Demus, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, 110–118; François Avril, Xavier Barral i Altet, Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, *Le monde roman 1060–1220*, vol. 2: *Les royaumes d'occident* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 236.
6. This is the judgment of Édouard Junyent, *Catalogne romane*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (La Pierre-qui-vire [Yonne]: Zodiaque, 1960, 1961), 1: 184. For similar estimations, see Avril et al., *Le monde roman*, 236; Núria de Dalmases and Antoni José i Pitarch, *Els inicis i l'art romànic s. IX–XII*, (Història de l'art català, 1), (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1986), 275–276.
7. See *Art of Medieval Spain*, 115, 137, 279, 280, 295, 296.
8. See Ainaud de Lasarte, *Catalogne romane*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, 178; *Romanesque Art Guide*, 76; Eduard Carbonell i Esteller, in “Sant Climent de Taüll,” *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 248.
9. For a general discussion of the theme, see the essays by Peter K. Klein, “Introduction: The Apocalypse in Medieval Art,” 159–199; Dale Kinney, “The

Apocalypse in Early Christian Monumental Decoration,” 200–216; and Yves Christe, “The Apocalypse in the Monumental Art of the Eleventh Through Thirteenth Centuries,” 234–258, in Richard K. Emmerson and Bernard McGinn, *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992).

10. “Un des plus étonnantes inventeurs de formes du Moyen Âge roman,” Avril, *Le monde roman*, 236.

11. See Lluïsa Carabasa i Villaneuva, in “Sant Climent de Taüll,” *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 250–252.

12. See the classic study of Chandler Rathfon Post, *A History of Spanish Painting*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1930), 83–148; Kuhn, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, part 2, 74–87; Marcel Durliat, “Iconographie d’abside en Catalogne,” *Les Cahiers de Saint-Michel-de-Cuxa* 5 (1974): 99–116.

13. Negative statements are difficult to prove, of course, and it may be possible that there are such images in existence, but I have not yet learned of any. The nearest parallels are of two types. First are the depictions, relatively common from the ninth century, of “Ecclesia” at the foot of the cross, holding up a chalice into which the blood of Christ spurts from the wound in his side. But, in all of these depictions known to me, Mary is shown as a distinct figure, usually standing behind or beside “Ecclesia,” and she is clearly distinguished from the allegorical figure holding a chalice. The second type of depiction that is relevant here involves fiery cups or bowls or lamps in the hands of virgins (but not the Virgin Mary). In the cluniac church of Berzé-la-Ville, for example, one finds five female figures (are they saints? or the five wise virgins of the Gospels?) who carry beaker-like vessels with rays or flames shooting out of them. Some scholars date these paintings to ca. 1120, and thus they may well antedate the paintings of the Virgin in Taüll, but none of these figures, almost certainly, is intended to represent the Virgin Mary. More will be said about this (see Chapter 7), but for the moment it is enough to repeat that nowhere else in Christian art, outside this small area of the Pyrenees, do we find images of the Virgin Mary holding a fiery vessel, or a vessel of any kind.

14. Some have asked whether it might not be Mary Magdalene rather than the Virgin Mary who is depicted here. I have considered that possibility elsewhere (see Goering, “The Virgin and the Grail,” 165 n. 4). Such a view would not affect the hypothesis of this book in any material way, but I am persuaded by authority (all art historians seem to agree) and by argument (for example, that Mary Magdalene is almost universally distinguished by her long, flowing hair with which she anointed Jesus’ feet) that the figure represented here is indeed the Virgin Mary and not the Magdalene.

15. For this, and other unsuccessful attempts to find a local tradition that would explain the appearance in art of an image of Mary holding a radiant bowl, see Goering, “The Virgin and the Grail,” 172–176. For other discussions of the meaning of the Virgin’s attribute in these Pyrenean churches, see Chapter 7.

16. Post, *History of Spanish Painting*, 1: 95. Post continues: “If it were not for the red contents and the rays, the cup might be interpreted as identical with the vases frequently carried by other saints in the Catalan frescoes, whatever be their significance as attributes, whether as containers of the relics of the saints kept beneath the altar or possessing some as yet undiscovered symbolism. . . . Gudiol elucidates the vessel as one of the ‘golden vials full of odours (or incense), which are the prayers of the saints,’ mentioned in the fifth chapter of Revelation, understanding that the rays are the incense. It would thus have the same significance as the cups held by other saints, but the fact that the red color and the rays are confined to the Virgin’s specimen would be left unexplained” (95–96).

17. Demus, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, 479.

18. Dodwell, *Pictorial Arts of the West, 800–1200*, 257.

19. The same observation must be made about the eucharistic cups and chalices that are honored today, in Catalonia and elsewhere, as the Holy Grail. The Cilician church of O Cebreiro, on the pilgrim route to St. James of Compostella, for example, venerates a twelfth-century chalice as the Holy Grail. Even more famously, the cathedral church of Valencia preserves an ancient chalice that has been honored as the Holy Grail since at least the fifteenth century. But there is no historical evidence for these pious devotions as early as the twelfth or thirteenth century. On the chalice at Valencia, see Antonio Beltran, *El Santo Caliz de la Catedral de Valencia* (Valencia: Roque Chabas, 1960). I have not seen the book by Salvador Antuñano Alea, *El misterio del Santo Grial: Tradición y leyenda del Santo Cáliz* (Valencia: EDICEP, 1999). The earliest document referring to this Valencian chalice as “the chalice in which Jesus Christ consecrated the Blood on the Thursday of the Supper,” is dated 1437 (see Mandach, *Le “Roman du Graal” Originaire*, 42). Whatever their origins, none of these popular Spanish devotions has yet been shown to date to the twelfth century or earlier, or to have influenced the Catalan artists in their depiction of the Virgin and the sacred vessel. On the contrary, it seems more likely that the images on the walls of the Pyrenean churches, when combined with the new stories of the Holy Grail being written in the north during the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries, prepared the way for the popular devotions witnessed today in O Cebreiro and Valencia.

20. Leo Magnus, Sermo 2, De ascensione; *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 138A, tract. 74. This homily is still part of the *Office of Readings According to the Roman Rite*, and the translation here is taken from the English edition published by the Daughters of St. Paul (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1983), 620–621.

21. The depiction of a female figure, representing “Ecclesia” (the Church), standing beneath the cross and collecting Christ’s blood in a chalice is very common in Christian art, and dates back probably to the ninth century. See Marie-Christine Sepière, *L’image d’un dieu souffrant (IXe–X siècle): Aux origines du crucifix* (Paris: Cerf, 1994), 184–223; see also note 13.

22. “Sunt autem sacramenta baptismum et chrisma, corpus et sanguis [Dominum],” *Isidori Hispanensis Episcopi Etymologiarum siue originum libri XX*, 6, 19, 39, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), n.p. Isidore’s discussion was included by Gratian in *Causa 1*, question 1 of his classic textbook of canon law, the *Decretum* or *Concordia discordantium canonum* (ca. 1140); Aemilius Friedberg, ed., *Corpus iuris canonici*, vol. 1, *Decretum magistri Gratiani* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1879), 1: 387–388 [C. 1 q. 1 c. 84, *Multi secularium*, attributed to Pope Gregory I]. It was still being treated as authoritative by Thomas Aquinas at the end of the thirteenth century; see *Summa theologiae*, 3, 84, 1, 1.

23. Isidorus, *Etymologiarum libri*, 7, 2, 3.

24. “Si quis . . . quodlibet sacramentum ecclesiasticum, utputa crisma, uel oleum sanctum, consecrationes altarium uel ecclesiarum, interueniente execrabilis ardore auariciae per pecuniam acquisiuit, honore male acquisito careat, et emptor atque uendor, et interuentor nota infamiae percellantur . . . quoniam symoniacum est.” See Gratian’s *Decretum*, C. 1 q. 3, c. 15; ed. Friedberg, 1:418.

25. See above, Chapter 5. Hugh of St. Victor, the most influential theologian of the early twelfth century, begins his discussion of the sacraments in his popular summa *De sacramentis* (ca. 1132) with the “sacrament of the dedication of a church, in which all the other sacraments are celebrated.” *De sacramentis christiana fidei* 2, 5, 1, trans. Roy J. Deferrari, *Hugh of Saint Victor on the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De sacramentis)* (Cambridge, Mass.: Mediæval Academy of America, 1951), 279. Gratian, too, begins the section devoted to the Church’s sacraments in his *Decretum* with a discussion of the consecration of churches. Friedberg, ed., 1: 1293–1424 (= *De consecratione*).

26. Photographs taken at the time of the discovery are printed in Arthur Kingsley Porter, *Spanish Romanesque Sculpture*, 2 vols. (Florence: Pantheon, 1928; reprt. New York: Hacker Art Books, 1969); see also Klein, “The Romanesque in Catalonia,” 192–193; Celina Llarás, “La Talla,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 116–118, 259–260.

27. Arthur Kingsley Porter, “The Tahull Virgin,” *Fogg Art Museum Notes* (1931): 246–272, at 247.

28. These gestures are to be distinguished from those of the quite popular statues of the Virgin in deposition scenes, where Mary extends her arms to receive the body of Christ as it is taken down from the cross.

29. Celina Llarás Usón, “Verge d’un davallament de Taüll,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 259–260; Kristin A. Mortimer, “Statue of the Virgin,” in *Harvard University Art Museums: A Guide to the Collections* (Cambridge, Mass.: Abbeville Press, 1986), 124; Ivan Gaskell, “The Virgin,” in *Harvard’s Art Museums: One Hundred Years of Collecting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harry Abrams, 1996), 162–163; Janice Mann, “Virgin from an Annunciation,” in *Art of Medieval Spain*, 318.

30. Arthur Kingsley Porter mentions an early report that “a St. John of the

same dimensions as the *Virgin* of the Fogg Museum has been found at San Clemente de Tahull,” but he seems never to have confirmed the fact, nor has it been confirmed by others; *Spanish Romanesque Sculpture*, vol. 2, pt. 3, 14. More recently H. Neuwedorp, director of the Art Museum of Antwerp, informed the Fogg Museum of “a possibly pendant *St. John* possessing the same style and dimensions,” in a Belgian private collection, but no evidence to substantiate this claim has yet been published. See Mortimer, “Statue of the Virgin,” 124; Gaskell, “The Virgin,” 162. I wish to thank Sarah Kianovsky in the Department of Painting, Sculpture, and Decorative Arts of the Fogg Art Museum for her generosity in allowing me to consult the museum files relating to this sculpture in July 1999.

31. Mann, “Virgin from an Annunciation,” 318.

Chapter 7. The Virgin and the Grail in the Pyrenees

1. Otto Demus comments: “The only more or less fixed rule [in the decoration of Romanesque church interiors] applies to the painting of the vault or semi-dome of the apse. This is, almost without exception, given over to the Majesty, a representation of Christ or the Virgin and Child surrounded by members of the heavenly court,” *Romanesque Mural Painting*, 14.

2. See “Sant Pere del Burgal,” in *Guies Catalunya romànica comarcals*, 8, *Pallars Sobira, Pallars Jussà, Vall d’Aran* (Barcelona: Portic, 2000), 67–71; Joan-Albert Adell i Gisbert, Imma Sánchez i Boira, Joan Ainaud i de Lasarte, and Francesc Josep de Rueda i Roigé, “Sant Pere del Burgal,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 15, *El Pallars Sobirà, El Pallars Jussà* (Barcelona: Fundació Enciclopèdia Catalana, 1993), 249–269.

3. See Post, *History of Spanish Painting*, 1: 136–147, and Kuhn, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, 40, for the latest date (ca. 1200). An earlier date (late eleventh or early twelfth century) is argued for by, among others, Otto Demus, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, 477; *Catalunya Romànica*, 15: 256; *Romanesque Art Guide of the Museu Nacional d’art de Catalunya*, 44; Joan Ainaud i de Lasarte, “Sant Pere del Burgal,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 15, *El Pallars Sobirà, El Pallars Jussà*, 256.

4. Post, *History of Spanish Painting*, 1, 95; Kuhn, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, 76–77; Demus, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, fig. 199 (“the Virgin holding a fiery Grail”); and most recently Dodwell, *Pictorial Arts of the West, 800–1200*, 257–258.

5. See Ainaud, “Sant Pere del Burgal,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 15: 256 (“un vas de cos globular”); *Romanesque Art Guide*, 53 (“chalice”); Betty Al-Hamdani, “The Burning Lamp and Other Romanesque Symbols for the Virgin That Came from the Orient,” *Commentari: Revista di critica e storia dell’arte*, new series 16 (1965): 167–185; Paulette Duval, *La pensée alchimique et le conte du Graal* (Paris: Champion, 1979), 167–169, 291–295 (“lamp”). Another authority would understand the vessel as one of the “golden vials full of odors (or incense), which are the

prayers of the saints,” mentioned in Apoc. 5:8; see José Gudiol y Cunill, *Els primitius*, 2 vols. (Barcelona: Barbra, 1927, 1929), 1: 169. Perhaps the most ambitious interpretation is that of Joan Sureda, in *La pintura románica en Cataluña*, Alianza Forma, 17 (Madrid: Alianza, 1981), 81–83. He would see in these Catalan Virgins an antitype to the “whore of Babylon,” described in St. John’s Apocalypse as holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and impurities (Apoc. 17:1–6). According to Sureda, the virginal antitype to the prostitute may have been constructed from themes in the Psalms and from passages about Mary’s conception of Jesus in the apocryphal Gospel of Bartholomew.

6. See Leonard Boyle, *A Short Guide to St. Clement’s Rome* (Rome: Collegio San Clemente, 1989), 44 and 49; Demus, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, figs. 48 and 49.

7. See Al-Hamdani, “The Burning Lamp,” fig. 5, and 167–168.

8. Al-Hamdani, “The Burning Lamp,” 168.

9. See Albert Roig i Deulofeu and Joan Ainaud i de Lasarte, “Santa Eulàlia d’Estaon,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 15, *El Pallars Sobirà, El Pallars Jussà*, 285–288; “Santa Eulàlia d’Estaon” in *Guies Catalunya romànica comarcals*, 8, *Pallars Sobirà, Pallars Jussà, Vall d’Aran*, 90–91; Post, *History of Spanish Painting*, 1: 114–116.

10. See Dídac López i Gutiérrez, “Santa Maria de Ginestarre,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 15, *El Pallars Sobirà, El Pallars Jussà*, 179–181; “Santa Maria de Ginestarre,” in *Guies Catalunya romànica comarcals*, 8, *Pallars Sobirà, Pallars Jussà, Vall d’Aran*, 48–49; Édouard Junyent, *Catalogne romane*, 2: 201. The apse paintings were transferred to Barcelona in 1918, and are now preserved in the National Museum of the Art of Catalonia.

11. See Manuel Anglada i Bayés, Maria Lluïsa Ramos i Martínez, and Teresa González i Verdaguер, “Santa Eugènia d’Argolell,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 6, *Alt Urgell, Andorra* (Barcelona: Enciclopèdia Catalana, 1992), 148–150; Post, *History of Spanish Painting*, 1: 108–110. The fragments are preserved in the National Museum of the Art of Catalonia. They have been variously dated from the early to the late twelfth century purely on stylistic grounds.

12. For the transfer, in 1140, of the churches of Taüll and the Boi Valley from the diocese of Roda to that of Urgell, see Jordi Boix i Pociello, “Les dificultats territorials de la diòcesi de Roda,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 16, *La Ribagorça*, 47–52.

13. See Jordi Vigué i Viñas, “La Pintura,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 6, *Alt Urgell, Andorra*, 407–409.

14. See the catalogue of the exhibition held in the Gemäldegalerie am Kulturforum, Berlin, 29 March–31 August 2003: *Andorra Romànica: Katalanische und westeuropäische Wandmalereien des 12. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Hartmut Krohm and Sabine Pénot (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin—Preussischer Kulturbesitz, 2003). See also Marta Planas i de la Maza et al., “Santa Coloma,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 6, *Alt Urgell, Andorra*, 422–433, at 426–431; *Guies Cata-*

lunya romànica comarcals, 4, *L'Alt Urgell, Andorra* (Barcelona: Pòrtic, 1999), 117–122.

15. This is incorrectly described as a flaming sword in the Berlin exhibition catalogue, *Andorra Romànica*, 38.

16. See Marta Planas i de la Maza et al., “Sant Romà de les Bons,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 6, *Alt Urgell, Andorra*, 460–469; “Sant Romà de les Bons,” in *Guies Catalunya romànica comarcals*, 4, *L'Alt Urgell. Andorra* (Barcelona: Pòrtic, 1999), 135–138.

17. A photograph of the document, along with a transcription and Catalan translation, are provided by Planas et al., “Sant Romà de les Bons,” 463.

18. See Planas, “Sant Romà de les Bons,” 462–466.

19. See Jordi Vigué i Viñas, Marta Planas i de la Maza, et al., “Sant Cristòfol d'Anyós,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 6, *Alt Urgell, Andorra*, 496–497; “Sant Cristòfol d'Anyós,” in *Guies Catalunya romànica comarcals*, 4, *L'Alt Urgell. Andorra*, 149–150.

20. See Vigué and Planas, “Sant Cristòfol d'Anyós,” in *Catalunya Romànica*, 6, *Alt Urgell, Andorra*, 497.

21. See Walter W. S. Cook, “A Catalan Altar Frontal in the Worcester Museum,” *Archaeologica Orientalia in Memoriam Ernst Herzfeld* (New York, 1952), 32–38. Although this piece is usually referred to as coming from Martinet in Cerdanya, Cook notes that it was acquired by the Worcester Art Museum in 1933 from “D. José Bardolet, an antique dealer of Barcelona, [who] told me he obtained this frontal from a hermitage [i.e., a small church] in Lles” (32 n.1). There is a good description of the altar frontal in *European Paintings in the Collection of the Worcester Art Museum*, 2 vols. (Worcester, Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, 1974), 1: 496–498.

22. See Walter W. S. Cook and José Gudiol Ricart, *Pintura e imaginería románicas*, Ars Hispaniae, vol. 6 (Madrid: Plus-Ultra, 1950), 187–266.

23. See Cook, “A Catalan Altar Frontal,” 34–35; José Gudiol, *Historia de la pintura en Cataluña* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1956), 27. Cook dated the altar-frontal from Lles (Martinet), on stylistic grounds, to “the last years of the thirteenth century”; see “A Catalan Altar Frontal,” 35. But few have been convinced by this assessment. The conservators of the Worcester Art Museum suggest a date in the “late twelfth or thirteenth century” (see *European Paintings in the Collection of the Worcester Art Museum*, 1: 496), and the most recent discussion of the frontal dates it, more plausibly, to the first half of the twelfth century; see Matias Delcor, “Frontal de Martinet,” in *Catalunya romànica*, 7, *La Cerdanya, El Conflent* (Barcelona: Encyclopædia Catalana, 1995), 198.

24. That all of these paintings represent the Ascension was already the conclusion of Kuhn, *Romanesque Mural Painting*, see especially part II, chapter 2, “Iconography,” 74–87.

25. The exception is the church of Santa Coloma, where, because of physical constraints, the Christ in Majesty dominates a side wall rather than the semi-

dome of the apse. There a central window is placed in the end wall of the building where it serves as a focal point for anyone entering the church. Later renovations at St. Christopher in Anyós leave the question of a central window in the apse moot at this time.

26. The apse of St. Clement originally had three windows, as can still be seen from the exterior, but two of them were sealed up when the apse decoration was made, leaving only the large central window to illumine the apse. See *Guies Catalunya romànica comarcals*, 7, *La Ribagorça*, 36. Irene Kabala first brought to my attention the possible importance of the windows.

27. At Estaon there is no row of Apostles. Instead, the Virgin appears among female saints. These surround a scene of Christ's baptism in the Jordan—where, of course, the Holy Spirit is also fundamental to the narrative; see Matt. 3:1–17.

28. See Étienne Gilson, "La mystique de la grâce dans La quête del Saint Graal," in his *Les idées et les lettres* (Paris: Vrin, 1932), 59–91.

29. That this was certainly a concern in later years is shown by an illustration in the *Saint Andrew Daily Missal*, ed. Gaspar Lefebvre (Bruges: Abbey of St-André, 1956), 700–701. Opposite the Feast of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is a full-page engraving of Christ on the cross, with a centurion holding a lance and Mary Magdalene cradling a chalice at its foot. The editor provides an "Explanation of the Illustration Opposite" that warns: "From this synthetical and symbolical picture, we should not infer . . . that the centurion was the same man who pierced our Lord's side, nor that Mary Magdalene collected Jesus' blood in the legendary 'Grail.'" I thank Mary Dzon for bringing this illustration to my attention.

Chapter 8. Perceval and the Grail

1. "Prologue: The Secret," in Caroline Roe, *Solace for a Sinner*, *Chronicles of Isaac of Girona* (New York: Berkley Prime Crime, 2000), 1–3. Medora (Caroline) Roe and Harry Roe were among the first colleagues with whom I discussed these ideas about the Grail. I thank them for their support and advice, and for Medora's delightful story.

2. See Frappier, *Chrétien de Troyes, the Man and His Work*, 3–48. For the relation of the southern troubadours to the Arthurian literature, see Rita Lejeune, "The Troubadours," in Loomis, ed., *Arthurian Literature of the Middle Ages*, 393–399.

3. I am indebted to Elisabeth Schulze-Busacker of the Université de Montréal for discussing this issue with me. It seems accurate to say that there is no evidence in Chrétien's writings that he had ever traveled in the Midi or in Catalonia.

4. "Atressi con Persavaus / el temps que vivia, / que s'esbait d'esgardar / tant qu'anc non saup demandar / de que servia / la lansa ni-l grazaus, / et eu sui atretaus, / Miels de dompna, quan vei vostre cors gen, / qu'eissamen / m'oblit

quan vos remir / e'us cug preiar, e non fatz, mais consir." Rigaut de Berbezilh, *Liriche*, ed. Alberto Varvaro (Bari: Adriatica, 1960), 137–138. The translation is based on Lejeune, "The Troubadours," 396–397. I thank Nicole Schulman for bringing Rigaut to my attention.

5. For a review of the literature, admittedly by one of the key participants in the debate, see Rita Lejeune, "Rigaut de Barbezieux," in *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: Le Moyen Age, 1273–1274*.

6. See Francis Bar, "Peredur," in *Dictionnaire des lettres françaises: Le Moyen Age, 1130*. For the arguments linking Perceval with Peredur, see Rachel Bromwich, "Celtic Elements in Arthurian Romance: A General Survey," in P. B. Grout et al., *The Legend of Arthur in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 47–55.

7. Wolfram writes: "der nam ist rehte enmitten durch," *Parzival*, 140, 17; Hatto translates this as: "Your name means 'Pierce-through-the heart,'" 81. See Werner Schröder, *Die Namen im "Parzival" und im "Titrel" Wolframs von Eschenbach* (Berlin: De Gruyter: 1982), 96, who suggests an imperative form, "per-ce-val," i.e., "through the valley," as the basis for Wolfram's play on words.

8. André de Mandach, *Le "Roman du Graal" originaire: Sur les traces du modèle commun "en code transpyrénéen" de Chrétien de Troyes et Wolfram von Eschenbach* (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1992), 11–18 and 35–39; repeated without substantial change in his *Auf den Spuren des Heiligen Gral*, 7–13 and 24–29.

9. See the cautiously sympathetic review of de Mandach's *Auf den Spuren des Heiligen Gral* . . . by Albrecht Classen in *The Medieval Review* (TMR), 4 August 1995 (<http://www.hti.umich.edu/t/tmr/>) 4 August 1995.

10. Mandach, *Le "Roman du Graal" originaire*, 20–31; idem, *Auf den Spuren des Heiligen Gral*, 15–22.

11. See Classen, review of de Mandach, *Auf den Spuren*, TMR 4 August 1995.

12. Indispensable for this description of the Perche and its medieval counts is the careful research of Kathleen Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship in Medieval France: The County of the Perche, 1000–1226* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Royal Historical Society, 2002).

13. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 17–18.

14. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 28–35.

15. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 35–45.

16. See the charts of family relationships in Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 6–7, 95, 110.

17. See Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 45–50. For an example of Rotrou's continuing fascination for the writers of fiction, see the recent novel written by a local physician in the Perche, François Bourdin, *Rotrou le Magnifique ou la lumière du Perche* (Ceton: Fédération des amis du Perche, 2002).

18. Albert of Aachen, "Historia Hierosolymitana," in *Recueil des historiens des croisades*, 5 vols. (1841–1906; rpt. Farnborough, Hants.: Gregg, 1967), 4: 316, 421–422.

19. Perhaps the most balanced account of this fascinating episode during the first crusade is found in John Hill and Laurita Hill, *Raymond IV, Count of Toulouse* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1962), 86–94.

20. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 51.

21. See Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 51 n. 80. For the debates about the date and composition of the poem, see François Pirot, *Recherches sur les connaissances littéraires des troubadours occitans et catalans* (Barcelona: Real Academia de Buenas Letras, 1972), 425–434, who concludes that some form of a *Canso d'Antiocha* was probably known in Catalonia and Occitania before 1159 and certainly before 1165.

22. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 52.

23. *The Ecclesiastical History of Orderic Vitalis*, vol. 6, Marjorie Chibnall, ed. and trans. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 399.

24. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 54–59.

25. For a good introduction to the complicated, and perhaps unfamiliar, history of Aragon before and after its union with Catalonia in 1137, see Bisson, *The Medieval Crown of Aragon: A Short History*. A good account in English of Alfonso's role in the reconquest of Spain is Clay Stalls, *Possessing the Land*.

26. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 59–60.

27. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 71–72.

28. Stalls, *Possessing the Land*, 35–41. See also, Carlos Laliena Corbera, “*Larga stipendia et optima praedia: Les nobles Francos en Aragon au service d'Alphonse le Batailleur*,” *Annales du Midi* 112 (2000): 149–169; Marcus Bull, *Knightly Piety and the Lay Response to the First Crusade: The Limousin and Gascony, c. 970–c. 1130* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 70–114.

29. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 72–75.

30. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 73 n. 85; cf. below, n. 37.

31. See Lynn H. Nelson, “Rotrou of Perche and the Aragonese Reconquest,” *Traditio* 26 (1970): 113–133, at 121–123.

32. See Stalls, *Possessing the Land*, 50–51. On Bishop Raymund's death, see Iglesias Costa, *Roda de Isabena*, 130–131; Antonio Duran Gudiol, “La Santa Sede y los obispados de Huesca y Roda,” 83–85, 129–131.

33. Many more charters remain to be studied and published. For published charters I have had recourse to those edited by José María Lacarra, *Documentos para el estudio de la reconquista y repoblación del valle del Ebro*, 2 vols., Textos Medievales, 62, 63 (Zaragoza: Anubar, 1982, 1985), and José Angel Lema Pueyo, *Colección diplomática de Alfonso I de Aragón y Pamplona*, Fuentes documentales medievales del País Vasco, 27 (San Sebastián: Editorial Eusko Ikaskuntza, 1990). Rotrou and Raymund appear together in April 1123 (Lacarra, no. 80 = Pueyo, no. 161), in December 1124 (L., nos. 105, 106, 107, 108 = P., nos. 135, 133, 134), again in February, May, and August 1125 (L., nos. 113, 120 = P., nos. 145, 151, and no. 155), and finally in June 1126 (L., no. 132 = P., no. 162).

34. See Lacarra, *Documentos*, no. 132; Pueyo, *Colección*, no. 162.

35. Zaragoza, Archivo del Pilar, arm. 9, cax. 1, lig. 2, núm. 4; ed. Lacarra, *Documentos*, 1, 105–106 (no. 91); cf. Pueyo, *Colección*, no. 120.

36. The charters edited by Lacarra and by Pueyo attest to Rotrou's presence in Spain in April 1123, and then again in October 1124, December 1124, February, May, and September 1125, February and June 1126, and then not again until February 1127. He is then attested in Spain constantly until 1129, when he is once again in northern France (see Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 73 n. 84).

37. See Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 73.

38. That Rotrou was, indeed, dedicated to the service of Alfonso during these years is confirmed by a grant he received from Alfonso in December 1128 (Lacarra, no. 164, Pueyo, no. 200) “for the service given and being given every day” (*propter seruitia que mihi fecistis et cotidie facitis*), Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 73 and n. 85.

39. André de Mandach came to the same conclusion in his two studies (see above, n. 8), although he derived the name “Perceval” from different philological arguments, ignored the Holy Lance, and associated the “Grail” with the chalice now in Valencia cathedral (and in Rotrou's day in the monastery of San Juan de la Peña, not far from Tudela and Zaragoza). Since the Grail was not associated with the eucharistic chalice before Robert de Boron told his story of Joseph of Arimathea early in the thirteenth century, the identification of the beautiful Valencian chalice with the Holy Grail probably was inspired by the Grail stories, rather than the other way around (see Chapter 6).

40. Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 74–85.

41. See Rita Lejeune, “Rôle littéraire de la famille d'Aliénor d'Aquitaine,” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale Xe–XIIe siècles*, 1 (1958): 319–337, at 328.

42. See Thompson, *Power and Border Lordship*, 92–95. For the literary accomplishments and patronage of these figures, see Lejeune, “Rôle littéraire de la famille d'Aliénor d'Aquitaine,” 319–337.

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